

Prologue:

Following the events of Harry Potter's sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Harry went back to the Dursleys one final time, as had been requested of him by the late Albus Dumbledore. Harry spent his week at the Dursleys in peace and left quietly without anyone noticing his departure, never to see the inhabitants of 4 Privet Drive again. A fact that pleased Harry so much he didn't even bother to conceal the tears of joy that ran down his face.

Harry arrived at the ancestral home of the Weasleys, affectionately known as the burrow, and was greeted by the entire Weasley family, aside from Percy, and a honorary Weasley like himself his best friend Hermione Granger.

Harry originally planned on skipping his seventh year of schooling at Hogwarts to complete the task of finding and destroying all of the Horcruxes that Tom Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort, had created. Harry's journey was going to be long and difficult, so his two best friends Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger also joined him instead of returning for their final year . Harry was keenly aware that his two friends were in the beginning stages of a relationship and voiced his concerns of the effect that the journey very likely would have on it. Surprisingly, Hermione appeared somewhat relieved to hear Harry's concerns while Ron was skeptical at best.

The three friends had planned on attending the wedding between Ron's brother Bill and Fleur Delacoeur as a launching point for the Horcrux search . Harry was surprisingly looking forward to the wedding, because after seeing his two best friends carry on a reasonably normal relationship, for Ron and Hermione that is. Harry was convinced he could perhaps enjoy the fruits of a relationship as well.

The primary reason for Harry's optimism was because he thought he might be able to start a relationship back up with Ron's younger sister Ginny. Harry had broken up with Ginny following Dumbledore's funeral saying that he couldn't afford her safety, and that he had an important task to undertake. Harry didn't know what he felt for Ginny but he knew that he cared for her a great deal. Harry had found it

interesting that he never really had any interest in Ginny until the last year and how he always felt so detached when he was with her. It made him feel normal, and yet if there was one thing Harry wasn't, it was normal and it bothered him.

The wedding was a lovely affair with the majority of the order attending. Unfortunately, a wedding that showcased the premiere wizards of the light in a non-combat situation, proved to be too enticing of a target to pass up for Lord Voldemort. As Voldemort was indiscriminately killing people he watched as his friends had gathered behind him. Harry watched as Hermione looked into his eyes intently, and he knew that she could see what he wanted to do. Harry craved that same connection with Ginny, because he often found the girl's actions to be rash and unpredictable, even for his standards. With a flick of his wand he sent his friends back to the relative safety of the burrow.

Of course, Harry, in a typical show of Gryffindor courage confronted the evil wizard in an attempt to allow the majority of the guests to get away from the killing rampage. Voldemort taunted Harry for some time about the death of Dumbledore as Harry was watching the guests escape unharmed. Of course, Voldemort was no fool and he took advantage of Harry's guard slipping, to launch a killing curse directly at him. Thanks in large part to his year of training with Dumbledore, Harry apparated out of the way of the curse, only to reappear next to Ginny and tripping over her. Voldemort sent another killing curse at the tangled pair and Harry watched completely horrified as Ginny managed to roll Harry over and intercept the curse herself. Harry trembled as he watched his girlfriend die before his eyes.

Voldemort watched the exchange with amusement and he thought that Harry's despair, despair at the death of another loved one, was quite entertaining. Voldemort even made a point to take advantage of Harry's despair to tell him, that everyone he cared for would meet their end before Harry, so that even if he were to succeed he would be alone. As Voldemort apparated away, Harry broke down into tears of anger and sadness over another senseless death.

Hermione immediately ran to Harry knowing that he would blame himself for Ginny's death, and she wrapped him up into a tight hug as she said, "Harry we all know you would have done the same for her if given the chance." Harry merely cried and held onto Hermione tighter than he ever had before as the rest of the Weasley family mourned the passing of the youngest.

Harry and his friends exited the Burrow with heavy hearts after Ginny Weasley's memorial service, to begin the inevitable search for the Horcruxes from the comfort of 12 Grimmauld Place. They immediately solved the first riddle of who R.A.B. was, as they found the locket that Harry and the headmaster had been searching for on the fateful night of his death. It had been stolen by Regulus Black who was the younger brother of Sirius and also a deatheater turned good. It had been found through a stroke of luck when Kreacher, the Black family house elf, had passed on clutching the locket tightly in his hand.

Harry thought their journey was going to be unbelievably short when he happened upon Hufflepuff's cup on his first lead. Dumbledore had been so sure it was a Horcrux that when Hermione later verified that it was not, Harry went off on his own for a few days finally making his peace with the death of the old wizard who was the closest thing to a grandfather he had ever had. After saying goodbye to Dumbledore in his own way Harry found that for the first time he was making his own way in the world and he felt liberated by that knowledge. By the time he returned Hermione had become rather clingy as she tried to console him about Dumbledore's death while Ron was largely indifferent to Harry's plight.

Over the course of the summer and the search for the Horcruxes, Harry found that Ron and Hermione had drifted apart quickly, a fact that didn't seem to bother either that much. Over the same period following Dumbledore's death Harry had grown much closer to Hermione, surprising considering their spotty sixth year as friends. While Ron and Hermione were technically still dating, Harry was sure that the relationship they shared had returned to its original state of friendship.

The trio spent the next two months frantically taking the clues that Dumbledore had left Harry in his pensieve, and they were able to find the Horcrux that Riddle had made of Ravenclaw's reading glasses. It was destroyed in the same manner as the diary had been in Harry's second year with venom from a basilisk fang. They had dispatched with the locket similarly at the same time and were left with one more Horcrux to find, before confronting Nagini and Voldemort.

Bolstered by the success of the summer, Harry had been persuaded by his two friends, but mostly Hermione, who specifically had taken an earnest interest in convincing Harry that he had a future, to return to Hogwarts and continue their search for the final Horcrux with the aid of the Hogwarts library and the now trustworthy staff. The new headmistress, formerly the Gryffindor head of house Minerva McGonagall, promised the trio all of the leeway they required to finish their task.

Harry and Hermione were named Head Boy and Girl which caused a fair amount of jealousy from Ron towards Harry, even though Harry had pointed out that Ron was still a prefect, and he had been since fifth year. McGonagall even mentioned to Ron in spite of his jealousy, that he never would have been named a Prefect except that Dumbledore assumed that Harry didn't need another responsibility at that point in his schooling. Ron's jealousy eventually led to a big fight, in which Hermione defended Harry, and she officially broke up with Ron, further straining their friendship with the temperamental redhead.

The months passed by and every lead to the last Horcrux turned up empty, as Harry began to get a very ominous feeling that perhaps his scar could be the last Horcrux. Hermione worked with Harry as they tirelessly searched for a solution, aside from killing Harry. Hermione eventually found a means of transferring a Horcrux in the black library and it could be done without committing murder. After they performed the ritual Harry's scar was destroyed along with his connection to Voldemort and the last two soul pieces remained.

During this time, Harry and Hermione grew extremely close and finally on Valentine's Day, Harry had kissed Hermione after they finished their rounds together. It had surprised Hermione so much that after he pulled away she bolted from Harry and locked herself in

her portion of the head's suite. Harry had been devastated at her flight, but he was visited in his own bed later that night by her professing her true feelings for him, and her earlier flight was forgiven. It seemed like such a natural move into their relationship that they both wondered how they had missed the connection that they shared earlier. In fact, Hermione had even admitted to Harry that she only went out with Ron because she had given up on Harry showing her any interest.

The pair was soon dating, and Harry realized that he felt much more strongly about Hermione than he ever had about Ginny. Harry soon realized that he was in love with Hermione and probably had been for a long time, and that she was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. News traveled quickly throughout the castle, as Harry and Hermione became the golden couple of Hogwarts. Ron eventually apologized as he could no longer ignore his friends, or his grades, and he had found himself a girlfriend with who he didn't argue with endlessly, in Luna Lovegood.

The couple's relationship with Ron had changed drastically since they were revealed as a couple, and one night it all boiled to a head when he attempted to rape Hermione, and revealed his true feelings towards the pair. The entire existence of the golden trio had been a sham all along, and Ron had given Harry a love potion the previous year in an attempt to get his sister together with Harry, and bring some fame and money into the Weasley family in the process.

Ron also admitted that he had only sought Hermione because he thought he'd have a chance to get her to sleep with him and that he had spent long enough in pursuit and now it was time to take what was rightfully his. Fortunately, Harry had shown up just in time and simply blasted Ron through a wall, and figuratively straight into a St. Mungo's hospital bed as he was charged with the illegal use of a love potion due to his actions of the previous year.

Ron's actions and words had come as a great shock to the couple, and after several hours of talking about the farce of the friendship they had shared with Ron, they went back to Hermione's room and made love for the first time. It had proven to be a purging experience for the both of them, as if by creating this new aspect of their

relationship, they were finally able to let go of whatever they had shared with Ron.

Finally, on graduation day, Voldemort, all of his death eaters, and over one hundred dementors attacked the grounds of Hogwarts. The ministry had been prepared for such a scenario after Harry had traded in a favor with the minister. The entire order and DA were also present as the final battle had begun. Harry and Hermione avoided the main battle, and they were able to subdue Nagini early in the proceedings and perform the Horcrux destruction ritual.

Harry went back out into the battlefield alone after he begged Hermione to stay behind, because he pleaded that he couldn't face the possibility of her dying while he lived. Hermione had agreed to his pleas, although she had no intention of keeping her promise, and as soon as Harry reached the battlefield she raced out behind him as she saw Harry and Voldemort locked up in a great battle. Harry's power had grown greatly in the short time since his scar had been removed, as Voldemort's siphon on his power had been broken. Harry's power rivaled that of Dumbledore's at his height and Harry's power was still growing while Voldemort's had diminished without the aid of his other soul pieces.

Harry was slowly defeating Voldemort, as all of the dark lord's forces had been decimated by the ministry, order, and DA. Voldemort knew of Harry's relationship with Hermione, thanks to his spy within Hogwarts, Pansy Parkinson. Voldemort shot the killing curse at Hermione who was caught unaware, and the dark wizard killed the last person alive that Harry truly loved. Harry felt a righteous rage grow inside of him as the woman he loved, had been killed by Voldemort like so many others before her. The Harry Potter fulfilled his destiny as he cast the only killing curse he ever would in his life, as Lord Voldemort was defeated and peace was brought to the wizarding world at a terrible cost to its savior.

Harry stood over Hermione's limp body and her bright brown eyes that had held so much life earlier in the day had been dimmed forever. Harry knelt down and hugged her body as he let out an anguished scream before he was enveloped in a blinding white light and vanished.

Harry felt like he had been floating for hours, and soon time lost all meaning, before he finally stopped floating, and found himself in front of a beautiful red headed woman Harry knew in his heart to be his mother. Harry softly asked, "Am I dead?"

Lily Potter softly said, "No my darling son, you are still very much alive. You have lived such a hard life, all of those that you have truly loved; they have been taken from you, and have left you alone as you have fulfilled your destiny."

Harry's heart constricted as he began to feel the anguish of losing Hermione once again, and before he realized it, he was surrounded by all of those that he had loved in his life and had been taken from him. Harry saw Lily and James Potter smiling proudly at their son, Hermione was smiling sadly at a promising future lost, Ginny was smiling at what was never hers, Sirius was smiling sadly at his wasted chance to raise Harry, and Dumbledore was smiling fondly at the young man that had grown to become a grandson to him. The smiling ended and those surrounding him began to chant something in a long dead tongue.

Soon the chanting stopped, and Harry could hear a great and powerful disembodied voice begin to speak to him as it said, "Harry Potter, you have suffered far too much in your life. The fates have been cruel to you, and we have decided that we must make amends to you and allow you a second chance for happiness. You will be returned to a crucial time in your life, with no memory of your prior existence. The times you will be forced to endure again, they will be trying, but I will aid you in saving some of those that are dearest to your heart. You will have no idea how I will help, but I will provide guidance in your quest. Follow my guidance and your future may yet be saved. Be well, young Harry, and have faith."

Harry disappeared into the same white light that had enveloped him earlier, as he felt weightless again and yet still remembered everything he had in the past. Harry had begun to wonder if fate had intended him to keep his memories after all, or if some mistake had been made. However, the longer Harry drifted in the void, he began to lose the memories, all the pain, and ultimately all of the love he had gained over time, and soon he was left floating much as he had

been in a critical juncture in his life, before he blinked and found himself in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the dungeons, with no memory of the future at all. Harry Potter, fate's child, had arrived.

Pg 300 Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire Snape looked coldly at Hermione, then said, "I see no difference."

Harry looked at Snape menacingly but before he could say anything Hermione whimpered and ran down the hallway to no doubt the hospital wing.

Harry looked at Ron questioningly but his red headed friend, who he currently wasn't talking to, merely shrugged his shoulders and sneered at Harry. Harry shook his head and suddenly he had visions of his time with the Dursleys, and how he had been ridiculed to the point of tears many times before. Harry immediately knew that he should catch up with Hermione, and he had to make sure she was alright.

Harry finally caught Hermione as she was preparing to enter the hospital wing. Harry gently squeezed Hermione's shoulder as she turned around with her long front teeth and tears running down her face. Harry grabbed Hermione and pulled her into a slightly awkward hug as her teeth were pressed against his chest. Harry didn't care how it looked; he had to tell Hermione how he felt about her.

Harry broke the hug as he could no longer feel Hermione sobbing and looked her in the eyes and said, "I'm sorry Hermione, I shouldn't have let Malfoy get to me. As it was, the most important person to me got hurt, because I couldn't control my temper."

Hermione's mouth curled into a small smile as her teeth prevented anything more before she said, "Oh Harry, it's ok, I can understand how it would bother you."

Harry shook his head and said, "I also apologize for not defending you from Snape, but I figured it would only be playing into his game by arguing with him, and that I couldn't really help you with this, if I was in trouble. But, I do want you to know that, with or without big

teeth you are still very pretty, and don't let anyone else tell you otherwise."

Harry grabbed Hermione into one last soft hug before he said, "I suppose I should get back to potions, before Snape takes a million points from Gryffindor. See you at dinner?" Hermione nodded happily as Harry turned around and began walking back towards the dungeon.

Harry never made it to the dungeon however, he was accosted by Colin Creevy who was looking quite excited about something before he said, "Harry, you're wanted in the headmaster's office for the traditional photo of the champions and the weighing of the wands. The headmaster told me to warn you that Rita Skeeter was there."

Harry sighed as he flung his bag over his shoulder and pulled his well used wand out of his pocket. Harry figured everyone else probably had polished their wand in anticipation of the weighing and Harry was just hearing about it now. Harry thought to himself, "I think someone put my name in the goblet just to make a fool of me. Well I won't give them the pleasure. I'll ask Hermione for her help, I know I can count on her."

Harry confidently walked into the office and was immediately grabbed by Rita Skeeter who was a very fake looking witch with entirely too much make-up on and appeared to have drawn on eyebrows. Skeeter began asking him several questions including why he had entered the tournament and then began talking about his parents. Upon hearing this Harry politely declined the interview and simply said, "Ms. Skeeter I will not do an interview now or ever that can be twisted into something terrible or unflattering that might include my parents. I have been forewarned about you and I assure you I will not take kindly to you misquoting me or snooping on me." Harry's tone brooked no argument from the slightly stunned reporter, leaving Skeeter in his wake Harry made his way to the other now laughing champions.

Ludo Bagman excitedly grabbed Harry and said, "Ah Harry, come right over here. We are just awaiting the judges for the weighing"

Harry rubbed his wand against his robes in an attempt to get some of the grime off that had collected on it, since the last time he had polished it. Fleur looked at Harry rather snobbishly as Harry continued his attempts, only to smear the grime around even worse on his wand. Harry merely shook his head at the French girl and muttered something about the female dogs of Beauxbatons.

Soon Mr. Ollivander, the old wizard who had sold Harry his wand in the first place, entered the room along with the Headmaster and Mr. Crouch. They all looked at the still seething Rita Skeeter, before Dumbledore was able to figure out what had happened and merely winked at Harry who shrugged his shoulders in a non-committal way.

The wand weighing ceremony went quite quickly as Ollivander merely took each Champion's wand and said the relative type and size of the wand before he tested them to make sure they worked. The entire ceremony took entirely too long, and after the Champion's photo was taken, Harry glanced up at a clock realized it was time for dinner.

Harry made his way down to the great hall and was surprised to find Hermione sitting by herself at the end of the table as Ron was stubbornly glancing at Harry as he entered. Hermione looked up and smiled brightly at Harry as she patted the seat next to her for Harry to sit at. Harry could tell that Hermione's front teeth had been fixed and in fact her front teeth had been shrunk slightly from how they normally were. Harry never really had a problem with her teeth before, but her smile seemed even prettier than it had even earlier that day.

Harry took his seat and softly said, "Hermione, I was wondering if you would help me finish the tournament. You are the one person I could or would trust with this, and it would mean a lot to me."

Hermione smiled and replied, "Well Harry, I had already planned on helping you. But I thank you for asking me, just the same. I have to say you have been really thoughtful today, I have to admit that I like it Harry."

Harry arched his eyebrow and asked, "Um, does that mean I'm not normally thoughtful?"

Hermione shook her head and said, "No, it just means you have been even more thoughtful today. I guess I am rather pleasantly surprised that you've taken the time to ask me how I am after everything that has been happening to you or against you lately."

Harry nodded as they settled in and talked during dinner about the potion assignment Snape had made after Hermione had left. Harry finished his treacle tart and looked very thoughtful, before he said, "I was thinking earlier that it would only be fair to help you with something of your choosing; especially if you help me with the tournament. Is there anything you want my help with?"

Hermione sat down the roll she had been buttering and looked thoughtful before she replied, "Well Harry, I am sure that you would have helped me if I had been placed in the tournament, but your idea has some merit. How about this, you help me with learning how to properly fly a broom and with some help in the practical parts of DADA, and I will tutor you in ancient runes and Arithmancy so you can take them with me next year during our OWL year."

Harry contemplated the offer before he cautiously asked, "Do you think I can do good in both classes?"

Hermione smiled and nodded before she replied, "I am absolutely certain that you can Harry. You really are quite bright, if you only applied yourself in classes. I can talk to Professor McGonagall, but I am sure she will wave you in. You should be waived in after she administers a short diagnostic test. Then you can finally drop that dreadful divination, and I will have some company in those classes."

Harry smiled and said, "Hermione, you have yourself a deal."

A/N: New Story so, Please Review and tell me what you think.

Fate sent Harry one little message earlier in the chapter and he is already down a different path than canon keep reading this should be a fun ride.

Chapter 1

The next morning as Harry and Hermione ate breakfast together, they took advantage of the quiet in the great hall early in the morning to sit up their schedule for studying and working on the first task. In the quiet of the morning an unusual owl flew into the still fairly empty great hall, and dropped a letter in Harry's lap.

Harry,

Your letter about your entry in the tournament is bothersome, especially when put into consideration with your visions and the events at the world cup. I can't risk being seen with you in public but meet me in the common room at midnight on November 22nd and we can talk about everything. I have spoken to Dumbledore and he has recommended a spot where I can be closer to you. Keep me up to date if you have any more visions.

Sirius

Harry and Hermione read the letter together and after some discussion decided they would both meet Sirius the night of the twenty-second. The next several days went by quickly as Harry patiently waited until the night he could see Sirius again and filled his days with vast amounts of studying and practicing spells for the first task.

Harry had found himself pleasantly surprised as to how much he enjoyed the time he spent with Hermione; in fact he enjoyed it much more than he ever had in the past. Harry found out that Hermione had a much better sense of humor than he ever would have thought, as they shared many quiet laughs about all things magic and muggle alike, in the library. The training for the first task often involved sessions that lasted well into the night allowing both Harry and Hermione to see a side of the other they never would have expected. Hermione found that Harry was almost a genius as to how he used magic and was surprisingly gentle, while Harry found that Hermione was a far gentler and feminine person than she normally let on in class or in the common room.

They also both noticed that Viktor Krum had begun to spend a lot of time in the library with the girls from his fan club, as he would steal glances at Hermione and alternate in some scowls for Harry. Hermione was smart enough to understand that Viktor was interested in her but she was holding out hope that Harry would ask her to the ball and with each passing day she felt her wish might come true.

Finally one day Hermione had seen enough of Viktor in her sanctuary, and she whispered angrily to Harry, "That's it Harry, I can't stand that stupid brute and his staring anymore. I don't even see what girls see in him anyways. I mean he isn't that handsome, and all he is famous for is that stupid wonky faint."

Harry began to laugh softly, which in turn caused Hermione to turn at him and glare. Harry's smile evaporated, before he said, "It's called the Wronski Feint Hermione, but I think the wonky faint sounds much funnier."

Hermione began to giggle quietly as she said, "Yeah I guess it does, doesn't it?" Harry nodded as his smile returned before she conversationally said, "I bet you'd rather be talking Quidditch with Ron right now, than talking with me in the library wouldn't you?"

Harry suddenly felt a voice in his head telling him to tell her how he felt as he said, "Hermione, I've realized since my name came out of the goblet that you are much more important to me than Ron has ever been. Don't get me wrong Hermione, I enjoy talking with Ron; but when things get serious, he tends to flake out a little. Hermione, you on the other hand, you have always been there for me, even if I have been too thick to realize it in the past." Harry took Hermione's warm hand into his own as he looked into her bright brown eyes and said, "Hermione you are my best friend by far, never doubt that, because I never will."

Hermione blushed and could only reply, "Thanks Harry, you have no idea how much that means to me." Harry smiled at Hermione brightly and they both went back into their homework ignoring Krum the rest of the day.

Finally, the day of Sirius' meeting had arrived, and after breakfast Harry and Hermione walked together to class. Transfiguration went

very well that day and Professor McGonagall held Harry after class to discuss something of interest.

McGonagall's face appeared softer than normal as she said, "Well Mr. Potter, I see your work has been improving lately, am I to guess that you have finally begun to take Ms. Grangers advice in applying yourself more to your studies?" Harry nodded and she continued, "Very good Mr. Potter. The other thing I wished to speak to you about, is, that as a Tri-wizard champion, you are required to have a date for the Yule ball. Each champion is also required to take part in the ceremonial first dance with his or her dates. Mr. Potter, I suggest you get a date soon Mr. Potter, typically the *best* dates are gone quickly."

Harry immediately began thinking of what girl he could take to the ball. Earlier in the year Harry had wanted to ask Cho Chang to the ball, but since the fateful day outside of Snape's class, he had found himself thinking more and more about Hermione in a way beyond friendship. In fact on occasion he had even started stealing glances at her while she read in the common room at night. Harry found the entire experience of falling for his best friend to be both thrilling and terrifying at the same time. It was thrilling because he had never really experienced similar feelings before and it led him to the same conclusion over and over again, he was in love with Hermione. He knew what a crush felt like because he had suffered through one with Cho for the first couple of months of the school year. The thing with how he felt about Hermione was that he didn't feel out of control like he had with Cho. In fact, every ounce of his being told him that it was right and the little voice in his head made sure to chime in its approval of the idea as well. The part that terrified him was that if Hermione didn't share his feelings he ran the risk of potentially ruining his one constant friend with any residual awkwardness that would be sure to follow. In the end, Harry mentally decided that he would have to be honest with himself and take a chance or he would regret it for the rest of his life.

As Harry had his mental struggle and reached his conclusion, he didn't even notice when McGonagall had stopped talking about his responsibilities for the ball, but he did finally realize it when she had started to look at him strangely, before she said, "Are you ok Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded and his face broke out into a big genuine smile thankful that he had found the answer to Professor McGonagall's challenge. Professor McGonagall responded with a smile and a nod, as she dismissed Harry. Of course, Hermione had patiently waited for Harry as had become their mutual custom of late, before they went to their next class.

Hermione looked at Harry's nervous countenance concernedly before she softly asked, "What did she want, Harry?"

Harry sighed and said, "She told me she was happy that my work has improved in her class, and I told her it was largely thanks to your help." Hermione blushed at the praise but Harry ignored it because he needed to keep his nerve for his potentially daring gambit ahead.

Harry then forlornly added with a small frown, "She also reminded me that I still need to get a date for the Yule Ball. I need to have a date for the ceremonial first dance and I have no bloody clue how to even begin to dance."

Hermione looked at Harry strangely for a second before she said, "Harry, as much as you don't want to deal with either of those things you really need to as an ambassador of the school." Hermione's expression became guarded before she asked, "Do you still plan on asking Cho Chang to the ball?"

Harry looked Hermione in the eye and replied, "No Hermione, I don't think I will. I've realized lately there are more important things about a person than just being pretty. In fact, I think I've begun to fall for someone far prettier and nicer than Cho ever will be. She is smart and funny and when she smiles she makes me feel warm all over. The only problem is that now I have to stop being such a bloody coward and ask her before she gets a date herself."

Hermione looked extremely disappointed for a fleeting moment, before she attempted to mask it, which didn't go unnoticed by Harry. Sensing his moment to ask her, Harry dropped to his knee and pleaded with puppy dog eyes, "Hermione, will you please go to the Yule Ball with me?"

Hermione flushed and looked around to see if anyone else was watching, before she smiled prettily and said, "Of course I'd love to go to the ball with you Harry."

Harry hopped up off his knee and gave Hermione a kiss on the cheek which caused her to flush even more. After a moment of some deep breathing, she gathered herself before she said, "But, I don't think it would be wise to tell everyone about it. Just tell anyone who asks who your date is, that they date specifically asked you not to tell anyone and I'll do the same. I know I'd never live down the harassment from the other girls, if they knew I was going with you, because truthfully a lot of girls want to go with you."

Harry nodded and they walked down to the great hall for lunch hand in hand. Harry asked one more question before they entered the hall. He whispered in her ear, "Hermione I've never really danced before. It wasn't the kind of thing the Dursleys ever would have wanted me to learn, because it meant they might have to let me out of the cupboard and out into public." Hermione scowled before Harry continued apparently oblivious to Hermione's reaction, "Could you help me learn before the ball?" Hermione's frown dissipated as she smiled and nodded and they walked into the great hall. When they entered Harry and Hermione could see several scowling faces, including the scowling presence of Ron, greet them as they walked past.

Harry and Hermione shared a look with each other as their hands imperceptibly were unlinked before they noticed that several others in the hall were looking at them menacingly, before they sat down, and Hermione borrowed Neville's paper to see what the fuss was all about. It was the Prophet and had been a late edition with an exclusive cover story. The cover story featured a picture of Harry and Hermione as they walked along the lake one-day after they had finished in the library a week earlier.

Harry Potter's Secret Heartbreak By: Rita Skeeter

Life as the boy-who-lived has been one tragedy after another. Now Harry Potter is experiencing a new heartbreak in the form of a cheating girlfriend. Hermione Granger a friend of Potter's and also a

pretty muggleborn student has been rumored to be Potter's girlfriend since his name was unexpectedly drawn from the Goblet of Fire.

My sources however indicate that Granger had been secretly in a tryst with fellow tri-wizard champion Viktor Krum. This Reporter hopes that Mr. Potter can end his relationship with Granger before the savior of the wizarding world suffers too much needlessly.

Krum has also been romantically linked with several influential pureblood witches, which makes this reporter wonder if Krum is doing nothing more than distracting Potter by stealing his girlfriend; especially at a time when the boy-who-lived needs all of the support he can get.

Harry finished reading the paper and feeling none of the previous need to protect the secret they shared, he twined his fingers with Hermione's and gave her a peck on the cheek. Hermione smiled and gave him an equally warm kiss. By the way many of the girls in the great hall reacted; a casual observer would think Harry was cheating on every single one of them. In fact many of the witches glared even more at Hermione than Harry, although she calmly shrugged in response as Ron stormed up to them.

Ron bellowed, "So this is how it's going to be. Harry lies about putting his name in the goblet and then *you* run to him and start snogging him like there is no tomorrow. I mean, come on Harry, you can do a lot better than her even if you are a massive lying git."

Harry and Hermione were both extremely startled by Ron's outburst as Hermione began crying into Harry's shoulder. Harry could only sputter, "Ron I'll talk to you in the common room tonight at 10 so we can help you get over your stupidity."

Ron appeared outraged and punched Harry in the jaw causing Harry to spit some blood out. Then Ron punched his stunned friend in the temple causing Harry to see stars and stare at his former friend in sad puzzlement. Finally, Ron punched Harry in the nose effectively breaking it and sending more of Harry's blood across the hall.

McGonagall broke up Ron's beating upon Harry after the third punch was thrown as she authoritatively said, "Mr. Weasley you are to be

given two months detention with Professor Snape, and you will be lucky if you aren't expelled."

Ron's face immediately went from red to pale as he looked at the now battered Harry stagger up and walk out of the great hall with Hermione on his arm. Ron immediately began to feel terrible about everything he had done and said, and he remembered the sadness on Harry and Hermione's faces as Ron hit Harry unprovoked. Ron suddenly felt like he had ruined two friendships because of his own jealousy, and he even deserved to get expelled because of his temper.

Hermione led the still staggering and most likely concussed Harry to the hospital wing. Harry was treated, by a fussing Madam Pomfrey, in a couple of minutes and after the shock of the moment had worn off he appeared to be fine. They went through the rest of their classes for the day as many students whispered and pointed as the new couple walked by.

That night Harry hoped he could talk to Ron in the common room and end the friendship they had shared for 3 years, because he could no longer stand the pettiness from Ron anymore. Harry waited alone in the common room as he had begged Hermione to go up to the girl's dorms, and perhaps do some damage control amongst the Gryffindor girls as Harry dealt with Ron by himself.

Ron came down the stairs of the boy's dormitory looking quite pale and quite remorseful as he took a seat across from the still bruised but healed Harry. Ron went to start but Harry cut him off and asked, "Ron, why is it that after 3 years of friendship you suddenly feel the urge to become extremely jealous of me and find it fit to beat me up because you believe every rumor you hear?" The question being rhetorical he continued, "I might not be an expert in friendships, but even I know that isn't how you treat your friends even if you are a jealous twit."

Ron gaped for a second before he turned his eyes down towards his feet and said, "Harry, I am really sorry for everything and I already apologized to Hermione earlier saying the same thing. I don't really have an excuse for my behavior, other than to say everything I have

done since your name came out of the goblet was extremely childish; and I will work hard to never do it again if you'll have me back as your friend."

Harry sighed and tiredly put his face in his hands before he said, "Ron, why do you think I should have you back as my friend again?"

Ron looked down at his hands too and quietly said, "Well Harry, we have been friends for 3 years and I hate to throw that away if there is anyway I can help it."

Harry looked up at his friend and said, "Ok Ron, I'll tell you what. I'll start talking to you again if you can admit that you will get some help from your family about your silly inadequacy issues. I can't deal with your poor sob story about your brothers being so great and that you are such a disappointment in comparison. Ron, I have been so envious of you because you have a big family that loves you a lot." Harry sighed and ran his hands through his hair distractedly before he continued, "I can't remember once in my life when someone told me they loved me. Do you have any idea how *that* feels?"

Ron shook his head and softly said, "I am truly sorry mate. I doubt I can ever say it enough. I'll work as hard as I can to make it up to you."

Harry nodded minutely sighed deeply and resignedly said, "Fine Ron, but now Hermione and I need to work on the first task, despite the fact that we don't know what the bloody hell it is."

Ron smiled and said, "What if I told you that I know what it is?"

Harry looked at Ron expectantly and said, "I'd say it would be brilliant."

Ron smiled and said, "My brother Charlie got here the other night, and he brought dragons for the first task. There are a Welsh Green, Swedish Short-snout, Chinese Fireball, and a nasty Hungarian Horntail."

Harry smiled genuinely before he rolled his eyes and muttered to no one in particular, "I'll put money down that I'll get the horntail." Harry

then looked at Ron and said, "Well, why don't we start our friendship over? But seriously mate, I won't just drop and forgive like I did in the past if you are a prat. Is that fine with you?"

Ron smiled and said, "That's more than perfect mate. I swear you won't regret it. I'll just leave now so you can prepare for the first task with Hermione."

Around 11:30 Hermione came down the stairs and saw Harry sitting in the chair facing the fireplace in deep thought. She went up to him and softly asked, "So, how did the talk with Ron go?"

Harry sighed and replied, "As good as it possibly could have. I really have no clue how one person can be so bloody immature one minute and normal the next." Still looking at the fire even though his voice relayed his amusement as he added, "He did tell me what the first task was though."

Hermione scoffed and said, "So he knew and he never told you until now?"

Harry put his hand up to calm Hermione and said, "Hermione relax, his brother Charlie just came the other day and told Ron about it. We have to deal with a dragon for the first task."

Hermione gasped and she said, "So, what can we do against dragons?"

Harry sighed and said, "I need to find a way that I can outmaneuver them."

Hermione's face lit up as she said, "Oh, of course, you can use the firebolt."

Harry shook his head and said, "I can only bring my wand."

Hermione looked at Harry skeptically for a second and then said, "Harry, you can use a summoning charm."

Harry crooked his eyebrow and said, "Hermione, I'd have to summon my broom a mile. Do you know how much power that takes?"

Hermione scoffed and said, "Yes Harry I do. I also know that you are one of those rare wizards that can do it too."

Harry still had his eyebrow crooked as he said, "And tell me exactly how you would know that?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Harry, with the patronus you made last year by the lake I made some approximations of the power needed to drive away 200 dementors and found that you are probably the most powerful student in the school already."

Harry sighed and said, "Great, another reason people can point at me and whisper"

Hermione crouched down on the floor and looked up into Harry's eyes before she said, "Harry, I know how much you hate attention but the more you fight it the worse it will get. Don't go out of your way to call attention to yourself and it will get better in time."

Harry nodded and pulled Hermione up into his lap. Hermione indignantly screamed, "Harry what do you think you are doing?"

Harry smiled and said, "I thought you might want a more comfortable place to sit. Is it wrong that I want to do that for my girlfriend? That is if she'll have me."

Hermione gaped for a moment before she stuttered out, "G-girlfriend?"

Harry's face fell and he quietly replied, "Yes, but it appears you don't want that."

Hermione shook her head quickly and said, "No Harry, it's not that, it's just that you surprised me is all. I mean, you just asked me to the ball today, and now you want me to be your girlfriend." She noticed Harry's expression hadn't changed at all, so she added, "I'd love to be your girlfriend by the way."

Harry face brightened as he pushed his glasses back up his nose and excitedly said, "That's great, w-would you like to sit in my lap for a little while here, before Sirius comes?"

Hermione smiled prettily and said, "Yes Harry, I suppose that would be fine, as long as you understand that we have to keep this relationship discrete for awhile. I love spending time with you, but I know that several girls will make things ugly for me, unless we put out the proper signals during the Yule Ball. Also, for other obvious reasons, we really shouldn't be found like this when Sirius comes."

Harry nodded and at midnight the fire began to crackle as Hermione and Harry got out of the chair and were surprised to see Sirius's face in the fire. Sirius looked startled and asked, "Harry, might I ask why Hermione is here?"

Harry smiled and said, "Sirius, I just thought my girlfriend, who is also incidentally my number one supporter for the tournament, should have the right to share in this conversation."

Sirius smiled and replied, "Oh, well then I suppose congratulations are in order for you two. You make a lovely couple. But for now we need to talk about who put you into the cup. I have suspicions that it might be Igor Karkaroff or Snape. Both were deatheaters and both got away with it after Voldemort's downfall."

Hermione said, "But Sirius, Snape has saved Harry in the past why would he start now?"

Sirius grimly said, "Well, I think that if Harry's visions are correct having his master back would motivate him to pick up his work again. The same goes for Karkaroff. Of course there could be someone else at Hogwarts too, or someone could be under the imperius curse. What I am saying, Harry and Hermione, is that you both must be careful now. I fear the times of Voldemort and his deatheaters are about to begin again."

There was a sudden noise from up in the dorms as Harry and Hermione glanced up nervously. By the time they both looked back down at the fire Sirius was gone, but he had spoken clearly and had left fear in their hearts."

A/N: **Please Review.** Next chapter is the first task. Keep reading and reviewing and tell me what you think of how I dealt with Ron.

Chapter 2

The day before the first task Harry managed to get Cedric alone to tell him about the dragons. Harry found the sixth year Hufflepuff exiting the great hall alone and Harry took the opportunity to confront him. Cedric look startled when Harry cornered him and pulled his wand.

Harry arched his eyebrow and said, "Cedric I'm trying to help you here, how bout putting the wand away?"

Cedric nodded hesitantly and then said, "You said you were going to help eh? How are you going to help me Harry?"

Harry smiled and replied, "Well I thought you might like some forewarning on the first task but if you don't I'll..."

Cedric blurted, "Bloody hell Harry, tell me if you know. I've been going crazy worrying about it."

Harry chuckled and then grew serious as he looked Cedric dead in the eye as he said, "The first task is dragons and if I had to make a guess I'd say Fleur and Krum already know. I'm sure Madam Maxime and Karkaroff have figured it out at this point already and have told Krum and Fleur. Fortunately, my friend Ron has a brother responsible for the dragons and I found out that way. I guess this way, no one has an advantage, ok?"

Cedric smiled widely and said, "I won't forget this Harry I promise you." Cedric ran off as Harry made his way to the library to do some last minute preparation on the summoning charm.

Harry had spent several hours in the past week working in the charm and he had begun to grow confident that he could successfully do the charm. The part that worried Harry was outmaneuvering the dragon after he had successfully summoned his Firebolt. Harry was confident in his flying abilities but it wasn't like he practiced against dragons often or ever at all.

Finally, around 10 pm the night before the first task Harry had successfully summoned every book that Hermione had in her bag, to him. Hermione nervously said, "Well Harry, now you just have to maintain your concentration and the Firebolt should come to you."

Harry nodded confidently and said, "You're right I can do this. I don't care if I finish last in this thing as long as I finish it."

Hermione nervously smiled and said, "Yes Harry you'll be just fine." Then Hermione did something that was rather unexpected as tears began to stream down her face as she fought to keep a smile on it.

Harry looked at Hermione with concern before he wrapped her up into a hug and urgently whispered in her ear, "Hermione are you ok? Is this about the task? It is isn't it? I promise I won't take any unnecessary risks."

Hermione sniffed as her tears began to stop falling, she put her hands on Harry's face gently and looked into his eyes. Hermione simply said, "Harry I-I've loved you for so long and I just couldn't stand losing you now."

Harry smiled at her as he dried her tears with his hand and then he wrapped her up into a hug before he said, "Hermione, how long have you loved me?"

Hermione smiled as she said, "Oh Harry, I've loved you since first year when you saved me from the troll in the bathroom. I fell *in love* with you last year after we saved Sirius on Buckbeak. Harry, that night we spent together with the time turner, it was the best of my life. I realized that night, that spending time with you is the most magical thing I've ever done. I realized then that I was in love with you and probably had been for a while."

Upon seeing Harry's shocked expression on his face she looked down at her feet and quietly continued, "I guess I never said anything before because I couldn't bear you rejecting me. I would have rather had your friendship than nothing at all."

Harry gave Hermione a peck on the cheek and wrapped her back up into a tight hug before he whispered softly into her ear, "Hermione, I

want you to know that you are the first person I remember ever telling me that they love me. I mean I assume my mum and dad told me when I was a baby but you are the first person who I remember saying that to me, and I want you to know that I love you too.”

Harry ran one hand through Hermione’s hair as the other gently caressed her face. Hermione sighed contentedly and said, “Harry, not enough people know the real you. Everyone thinks that you are the boy-who-lived. If those people ever took the time to know the real you, they would have a hard time not loving you.”

Hermione broke the hug and gave Harry a peck on the cheek before she picked up her books and placed them in her bag. Harry then surprised her as he slung her bag and his own over his shoulder and grunted from the added weight before he offered his hand and they walked back to Gryffindor dorms hand in hand.

Harry slept peacefully that night, not dwelling on the first task, but instead dreaming of the warmth he felt whenever he hugged Hermione and how much love he felt whenever he looked into those bright brown eyes. Harry knew that even though he didn’t have much experience in matters of the heart, he was madly and deeply in love with Hermione and he felt complete.

However, Harry awoke the next morning, and all of the good feelings from the previous night were replaced with the anxiety of what his failure today would mean. Harry knew he would have to somehow outmaneuver the dragon to do whatever the task required. This didn’t worry Harry as much as it should have or even had the previous night. Instead, Harry was worried that despite the fact that he knew what he wanted to do, he would somehow mess it up and end up being a mess all over the ground.

Harry got a shower and threw on his champion’s uniform he had been given. It was a long sleeved red and black short with matching red and black pants and Harry had managed to borrow a pair of dragonhide boots from the headmaster. Harry nervously marched out of the common room and through the portrait as he made his way down to the great hall and to see Hermione one last time before the task.

The raven haired wizard entered the great hall searching for the brown eyed bushy haired witch that was the only one who could make him feel better. Harry found Hermione talking to Ginny at the Gryffindor table and she looked only slightly less nervous than he did. Harry sat down across from the two girls and got himself a cup of tea. The two girls watched concernedly as Harry's hand were trembling so badly that he spilled all of the tea out of his cup before he got it to his mouth.

Ginny softly said, "Relax a little Harry, you'll be fine today."

Harry cracked a small nervous smile and said, "Who said I am nervous? More like I am worried sick."

Hermione took Harry's trembling hand and soothingly rubbed his hand as she said, "Harry you'll be fine because I need someone to dance with at the ball. If you think this is terrifying wait until you get to dance in front of the entire room."

Harry took a deep steadying breath as his eyes locked with Hermione's, green eyes met brown conveying everything that they needed to, and he said, "Ok I'll be fine. Thank you, both of you, for helping." Both girls beamed at the compliment before Harry served himself a cup of chamomile and drank it down with no further problems.

Professor McGonagall had watched the entire scene unfold and took some pride in how well her young Gryffindors were handling the situation. Truthfully, she couldn't blame Harry for being nervous because she certainly knew she would be if she had to face a dragon. She glanced at her watch and realized it was time to escort Harry down to the champion's tent.

Harry noticed Professor McGonagall walking towards the table and flashed both Ginny and Hermione one last grateful smile before he stood before McGonagall could say anything and walked out of the castle with her escort. Harry really didn't say anything the entire walk but gave the typically stern transfiguration teacher a hug and whispered in her ear, "Thank you for the advice about getting a date for the ball. It finally helped sort some stuff out for me."

McGonagall cracked a wide smile at Harry and simply said, "I know how it feels to be right in front of someone for the longest time, and waiting for him or her to notice you the way you want them to. I am just glad you had the sight to see it and acted upon it."

Harry smiled once more before he turned and walked into the tent slowly taking his time before he went before the firing squad. When Harry entered the tent he was surprised to see the other 3 champions looking far worse than thought he must like. Cedric was looking rather green while Fleur appeared near tears as Madam Maxime rubbed her back and comforted her. Krum glared at Harry before he walked up to him and said, "Potter may I haff a vord?"

Harry nodded confusedly before he said, "Um, sure Viktor what can I help you with?"

Krum led Harry to the far corner of the room before he said, "I would like to know what kind of relationship you haff with Hermininny?"

Harry looked him straight in the eye with a dangerous glint and he said, "Well she is my best friend in the world and I love her. She is also my girlfriend so why do you ask?"

Viktor who was much larger than Harry took a step back when he saw the dangerous look in Harry's eyes before he replied, "I vas just vondering. I am glad she has someone who cares for her like she should haff."

Harry nodded and confidently said, "Viktor as long as I am alive she will never have to worry about that." Viktor reached out with his hand and they shared a manly handshake before they broke apart and began their preparation for the first task.

Harry did some meditative breathing Hermione had taught him and found he was able to slow down his heart a little and could feel his body slowly relaxing.

Soon enough Ludo Bagman went over to Harry and nervously asked, "Um, Harry could I have a word outside the tent for a moment?"

Harry shrugged and was led outside the tent by Bagman. Bagman nervously addressed Harry as he said, "Um Harry, I was just wondering if you needed some help with the task today, because we all know you are the underdog and I figured I could even up the odds a little...."

Harry cut him off as he angrily said, "No thank you Mr. Bagman, and I would prefer you don't insult me with such an offer again." Bagman shrunk in front of Harry's glance which made Harry wonder if he had suddenly become intimidating overnight.

Harry made his way back into the tent and was soon joined by Barty Crouch Sr., Karkaroff, and Dumbledore.

Crouch gathered the champions into a circle around him and manufactured a small bag. He calmly said, "Ms. Delacoer, if you would be so kind as to pick out of the bag."

Fleur drew out of the bag and pulled out the miniature version of a Welsh green. Krum went next and pulled out the Chinese fireball. Cedric went third and pulled out the Shortsnout, leaving Harry the bloody horntail. Even Harry's model dragon had an attitude as it nipped at his fingers and snorted out smoke.

Crouch simply said, "Your task will be to capture the golden egg from a nest full of dragon eggs. The dragon that you each have drawn will guard the egg. If you do not succeed in the task you will be eliminated from the tournament because the egg is necessary to compete in the second task. Now each of you will attempt the task in the order you drew from the bag. Good luck to each of you."

Fleur was escorted out of the tent to face her dragon as the other 3 champions nervously waited. Harry began to resume his breathing again as Cedric and Krum were pacing nervously.

Harry could make out the gasps and cheers of the crowd that went on for what seemed to be 10 minutes before he heard Bagman announce, "Ms. Delacoer has done it. Let's give her a hand."

Harry then began to tune out the noise again and soon Krum had left the tent leaving the two Hogwarts champions alone. Harry faintly

caught Bagman say, "Krum has successfully captured the egg although he has been injured like Ms. Delacoer. Let's give him a hand."

Harry broke out of his breathing for a second before he glanced up at Cedric and gave him a nod that Cedric returned before he went out of the tent for his turn. As soon as Cedric left the tent Harry decided it was time to get his blood circulating and did some jogging in place as he listened to Bagman's commentary on Cedric's attempt to capture the egg. From the sounds of things Cedric attempted to distract the dragon with some transfiguration. Cedric succeeded but not without getting burnt a little before Bagman said, "Well done Mr. Diggory. He is the third champion to successfully complete the task but has been injured also. Let's give him a hand."

Harry took a couple of calming breaths and walked out into the stadium. Harry found the arena to be a quarry as he glanced around and spotted the horntail. He then said, "Accio Firebolt." Harry concentrated as he cast the spell and then waited until he heard the telltale sound of the Firebolt rushing through the air. Harry felt a wave of relief that he had completed the first part of his plan. Harry then mounted the Firebolt as Bagman bellowed, "Mr. Potter has used the summoning charm to get his broom."

Harry began soaring on his broom as he pondered how to get the horntail away from the nest. Harry decided to use Krum's favorite weapon against him as Hermione so fondly called it the wonky faint. Harry zipped vertically into the air around 100 feet above the stadium.

Harry went into a steep dive as he went towards the horntail in an attempt to get it off of the nest. Harry got within 10 feet of the nest as the horntail lashed out with its tail and Harry narrowly avoided the strike. Harry heard the crowd gasp in horror as Harry narrowly avoided the dragon.

Harry climbed up around 50 feet this time and then went into his dive and this time the dragon lashed out with its jaws and came off of the nest in an attempt to get Harry. Harry quickly reversed direction and scooped the egg up with one hand as he skimmed the ground. The crowd went crazy as Harry grabbed the egg and completed the task,

but the horntail wasn't finished as it lashed out with its tail and gouged Harry's stomach and knocked him of his broom much to the horror of the crowd.

The wizards in charge of controlling the dragons, including Charlie Weasley, immediately sprang into action and had herded the female horntail out of the arena as quickly as possible. Madam Pomfrey was frantically tending to Harry as the few medi-witches from St. Mungo's helped, either by forcing blood replenishing potions down Harry's throat or by healing his stomach wounds where they could, in stabilizing Harry and getting him transported to the hospital wing.

The crowd had gone deathly silent until someone from a group of Hufflepuffs began to chant Harry's name. The entire crowd was chanting his name as his score was announced that left him in the lead. Hermione had rushed down to Harry and walked with Madam Pomfrey as the elderly matron levitated Harry back to Hogwarts as she constantly monitored his condition. Hermione had grasped Harry's cold and clammy hand as she silently cried at another of Harry's close brushes with death.

Harry awoke the next morning surrounded as he was in his usual bed in the hospital wing. Harry grabbed for his glasses but found he couldn't even lift his arms off of the bed. Harry saw the blur of a pair of small hands that grabbed his glasses and gently put them on his face. As the world came into focus Harry could see the face that he loved so very much as Hermione made a tearful smile at Harry before she leant down and kissed his forehead.

Harry croaked out, "Hermione, what happened to me?"

Hermione frowned as she fought back some tears before she said, "You grabbed the egg and that horrid dragon nearly killed you with its tail afterwards. Your ribs were all shattered so Madam Pomfrey had to re-grow them all. You also lost a lot of blood. If Madam Pomfrey had been a minute later she said you would have died. Harry I almost lost you."

Harry painfully took a deep breath and said, "Hermione I'm sorry I caused you to worry. I thought I was home free after I grabbed the

egg. I never even thought the dragon would still try to get me afterwards.”

Hermione nodded and replied, “I know Harry and I don’t blame you for any of this. You did the best of any of the champions; you just had the worst dragon.”

Hermione shuddered as she began reliving the horror of seeing Harry broken and battered on the ground. After a moment she shook her head and continued, “I am actually proud of how well you handled everything Harry, and when we get you out of here we can start your work on the second task. Thankfully the second task won’t include any dragons. Madam Pomfrey said you should be out by Tuesday morning and can attend classes again then. I’ll take notes for you in all of your classes on Monday and collect your homework.”

Harry smiled and quietly said, “Thanks Hermione I love you.”

Hermione smiled and replied, “I also talked to Viktor earlier today in here when you were sleeping and he told me what you said to him in the tent. Did you mean what you said?”

Harry smiled and replied, “Every single word Hermione. As long as I live I will love you and treat you the best I can.”

Hermione smiled and gently gave Harry a kiss on the lips before she pulled away and said, “Same goes for you Harry. I will always be there for you. Now you should get some rest and I’ll visit again later ok?”

As Harry closed his eyes to sleep once again he drifted off and dreamt of the young witch that had his heart for as long as she wanted it.

A/N: So there is my version of the first task, please review and tell me what you think. Keep reviewing like you all are it really helps me in the writing process to have as much input as possible.

Chapter 3

The days immediately following the first task were spent avoiding the scores of silly girls that thought they had to be Harry's date to the Yule Ball. Apparently all of them had forgotten the article about Harry and Hermione and they completely ignored Hermione whenever she was in Harry's presence.

Hermione received a multitude of howlers from several less than reputable witches, and also a few wizards much to Harry's horror. They were all deluded enough to think that Harry was just going out with Hermione until he met one of them. The one howler that perplexed and upset Harry and Hermione the most came from Mrs. Weasley who called Hermione a "scarlet woman" and "gold digger". The message conveyed by the howler upset Hermione quite a lot, and when Harry glanced over to Ron he was already getting verbally berated by Ginny for not straightening their mother out on what was really going on.

The next day it was Ron who received the howler and Hermione was given a profuse apology letter from Mrs. Weasley. Harry and Hermione continued to avoid the majority of the fan girls by sticking to the library as much as possible as they continued their deal of exchange.

Krum had stopped spending time in the library after the article came out. Harry had made great progress in teaching Hermione the theory of creating a patronus and they practiced in the common room late at night. Harry immediately liked Arithmancy but Ancient Runes were proving to be somewhat confusing because each rune was very similar and they all shared similar names which made memorization difficult and Harry had to learn them through study which took much longer.

Hermione also promised to work on flying lessons when the weather warmed up in the spring; which according to Harry wasn't nearly soon enough. They also spent many late nights alone in the common room with Hermione teaching Harry how the various dance steps for the ball.

Hermione and Harry each had to turn down several last minute desperation pleas for dates to the Yule Ball. Surprisingly, Ron asked Hermione to the ball despite the fact that he had punched Harry for snogging Hermione less than a month earlier. They both agreed that this either made Ron exceptionally inattentive or exceptionally dim. Hermione was inclined to believe the latter while Harry kept his thoughts on the matter to himself. They each continued to tell every person that asked either of them to the ball that they had promised their date to not tell anyone else who they were going with.

The few observant people in the school were well aware that Harry and Hermione were going together, because they could be spotted walking to class holding hands. But, far too many students spent more time staring at Harry or Hermione's faces than their hands. For this reason alone it remained a secret to the painfully delusional masses amongst the student population.

Finally, Christmas morning Harry awoke and found a note from Sirius lying at the foot of his bed.

Harry,

I apologize for taking so long to get a hold of you following the 1st task but I have been busy getting settled into a new place where I can keep a good eye on you. You did very well on the task but you need to remember that even if you think you have won doesn't mean your opponent does. It's a valuable lesson to learn and I am glad you have already.

Treat Hermione well at the Yule Ball and you might get rewarded for it. I'm just kidding; I know Hermione isn't that kind of girl but I can never hope too hard for my godson now can I? Remember to keep an eye open for suspicious people. I'm sorry I didn't get you a Christmas present but I promise I'll make it up to you next year.

Love,

Sirius

Harry yawned mightily and opened the curtain around his bed to see Dobby standing just outside where his curtains had been with a pair

of colorful mismatched socks in his hand. Dobby said, "Dobby is giving Harry Potter his Christmas presents because Dobby knows how generous and great of a wizard he is."

Harry blushed at the praise before he remembered he hadn't gotten Dobby a present before he lied and said, "Thanks Dobby these are great. I erm, have my present for you in my trunk." Harry opened the trunk and found the nicest pair of socks he had. They were an old pair he had gotten from the Dursleys that had gone gray from their constant use because they were one of the few pairs of socks that had no holes in them.

Dobby squealed and woke everyone else in the room up when he said, "Mr. Harry Potter is so nice to give Dobby two matching socks. Now when Dobby makes another matching pair he will have two new pairs of socks." Harry smiled and Dobby vanished with a pop leaving a befuddled Harry glancing down at his new purple and orange socks that had snitches stitched on to them.

Harry woke Ron who had awoken from Dobby's shrieking but went back to bed immediately afterwards again. Ron mumbled, "Aw come on Harry let me sleep."

Harry chuckled and said, "Alright Ron I guess we'll just take your presents then."

Ron popped out of bed and was out the door and down the stairs faster than Harry thought humanly possible before he walked down the stairs behind him. They met Hermione and Ginny in the common room as they each had wrapped their presents the night before and placed them under the tree in the corner.

Harry gave Hermione and Ginny a hug before he handed them their presents from him. Harry had gotten Hermione a charm necklace he had found in Hogsmeade the last trip they had before Christmas. It had two charms in it being a book and a heart. Harry told her that he would put more on the necklace as time went by. Harry had also gotten Ginny a full package of her favorite sweets, cauldron cakes. Harry had gotten Ron a new book on the Cannons called, *Chudley Cannons: Lovable Losers*. To say the least, Ron didn't find Harry's present nearly as funny as he or the girls had.

Harry had received an Ancient Runes book from Hermione that was supposed to help the reader decipher the subtle differences between the runes. It was titled *Ancient Runes: Help for the Non-Deciphering Eye*. Hermione thought the title was hilarious while Harry chuckled a little and Ron and Ginny looked like both Harry and Hermione had gone crazy. Ron had gotten Harry a full compliment of Chocolate Frogs while Ginny had gotten Harry a full supply of dung bombs.

After they finished opening their presents and picking up their mess they took their gifts up to their rooms and went down to get some breakfast in the great hall. Ron was still grumbling about not having a date to the ball yet and it was the day of the ball. Harry shrugged and suggested he ask Parvati Patil to see if she had a date yet. Ron came back with a big grin on his face and said, "Well mate, I got myself a date now. Sorry, it looks like you and Hermione are the only ones who couldn't get a date."

Harry shook his head at Ron dismissively before he glanced over at Hermione and winked at her which caused Hermione to *giggle*. Harry still had a hard time seeing Hermione do something so inherently girlish but since it also was endearingly cute so he quickly dismissed the other thoughts.

After they finished breakfast Ginny and Hermione went up to the Gryffindor common room to get ready even though Ron was still in denial about Hermione having a date. Harry challenged his intellectually challenged friend to some wizard's chess and after he was beaten for the 5th straight time he decided to spend some time with the egg because he hadn't really found any time to open it beforehand. Harry opened the egg and it began to emit a head splitting shriek which caused all of the boys in the common room to yell at Harry. Harry shut the egg and returned it to his trunk before he decided it was time to get dressed for the ball.

Harry had gotten a set of plain black dress robes with a white undershirt, while Ron had gotten a set of hand me downs from his mother that were a pale red with frilly undershirt. Ron wailed, "Why couldn't I have a set like yours Harry?"

Harry merely shrugged not wanting to get into an argument with Ron about yet another of his insecurities, his family's lack of money and merely said, "I don't know mate but it matches your hair." Harry chuckled at Ron's indignant expression before Ron cracked a smile and hit Harry in the head with a pillow. Harry feigned shock before he said, "Aw come on Ronniekins I just got my hair perfect."

Ron chuckled and snorted before he said, "Sure Harry, your hair is perfect, just keep telling yourself that."

Harry ran his hands through his unruly hair in front of the mirror before he said with an exaggerated sigh, "I just don't know what to do with it." They both laughed after Harry said this and then finished up their limited preparation. They both walked down to the common room about an hour before the ball was to begin and waited for their dates. Neville was already down waiting for them in a nice set of brown dress robes as he nervously waited for Ginny to come down. Ron had initially reacted poorly to his little sister going to the ball with Neville before Harry told him that it was better Neville than someone like Malfoy which promptly shut the redhead up.

Parvati came down the stairs and looked very pretty in a traditional Indian dress with a sash over her exposed shoulder. Harry smiled at her and waved before Ron stuttered, "H-Hey Parvati you look nice. Shall we?" Parvati nodded as Ron shot Harry one last sympathetic glance as they exited through the portrait.

Ginny was next down and she was dressed in a pretty green dress as Neville offered his hand and said in a very un-Neville like, "My lady shall we go to the ball." Neville then kissed Ginny's hand which caused the diminutive Gryffindor to giggle and wink at Harry.

Harry waited five more minutes before Hermione finally, made her way down to the common room. Hermione looked like a million galleons as she made her way down to Harry. Her hair was no longer bushy but it was straighter with a little curl in it and had been placed in an elegant bun behind her head as a few loose hairs framed her face. She was wearing an elegant but form fitting periwinkle blue dress that was made of some shiny material as she wore the largest smile Harry had ever seen her wear.

Harry offered his hand and simply said, "You look even more beautiful tonight than you usually do."

Apparently this was the proper thing to say as Hermione wrapped Harry into a tight hug and whispered in his ear, "So Harry I think I am ready to be the envy of every girl in the ball with you as my date." She broke the hug and kissed a now blushing Harry on the cheek before she took his offered hand and they made their way down to the great hall.

As Harry and Hermione walked down the stairs to the great Hall, Ron and Parvati waited for Harry and whatever girl he had gotten at the last minute for the ball and the 1st dance. Ron spotted Harry and he was walking with a beautiful girl in a blue dress. Ron's jaw dropped open at the gorgeous girl with the curly brown hair before he realized it was Hermione and sputtered at the beaming couple before he glared and said, "You guys could have told me you were going together."

Harry sighed and quietly said, "Ron, if you pull this tonight, don't bother ever talking to either of us again."

Ron indignantly screamed as he drew the attention of everyone else in the room, "I don't bloody care. Like it matters, especially when you have friends that are always lying to you."

Hermione hissed at him as she quietly said, "For once in your life you daft git you need to realize, that just because you aren't privy to every detail of our lives it doesn't mean you are being lied to."

Harry added, "Ron you've went all of one month since you attempted to bludgeon me to death. Did you not notice how Hermione and I have been holding hands for the last month? Doesn't that seem to be a little bit of a change to you?"

Ron could only stutter, "I guess I wasn't thinking."

Harry shook his head sadly and replied, "No mate that's the problem. You never do take time to think of anyone else's feelings."

As soon as Harry got those words out Ron was being led from the room by McGonagall who muttered something about having a talk with Molly Weasley and also detention for the rest of the year.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and took deep steady breaths before McGonagall reappeared and softly said, "Mr. Potter, and Ms. Granger I fail to see why you put up with the fool."

Harry and Hermione merely shook their heads to indicate that tonight was the final straw with Ron before Professor acknowledged this and said, "Very well, you both look very nice tonight and are representing Gryffindor in a fine manner. Please line up behind the other champions and their dates and you will enter when you are announced."

As the other champions entered Harry and Hermione entered and there were various whispers that indicated how surprised everyone was that Hermione looked like she did and how the article had been right after all. The only ones who had managed to look poorly upon the couple were Ron and Malfoy as everyone else wore a combination of speechless and enamored looks at with the youngest of the champions and his date.

The great hall was decorated in all of its glory with shimmering elegance and was made to look like a giant ice castle. All of the judges were sitting at a large round table at the front of the hall.

Dumbledore was watching Harry and Hermione with his eyes twinkling madly and almost appeared to have his eyes misting with some unshed tears. Karkaroff looked at the couple with contempt because had known Viktor had planned on asking Hermione to the ball himself. As it was Krum had brought some non-descript girl from his ever adoring fan club. Fleur had gone with Roger Davies from Ravenclaw and Cedric had brought Cho Chang as his date.

Harry suddenly became exceedingly happy that he had dismissed the idea of taking Cho Chang to the ball. It became quite apparent that he had made the correct decision in asking Hermione as they carried on a very nice conversation about what they had each gotten *snuffles* for Christmas. They could overhear Cedric exasperatedly trying to get Cho to talk about something other than how this girl and that girl

looked. The amusement of the situation was readily found in the young Gryffindors' faces as they occasionally rolled their eyes at something Cho had said.

Dumbledore took some time to strike up a conversation with the two young Gryffindors as he asked, "So Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger, what do you plan on eating tonight?"

Hermione answered, "Something simple headmaster, we don't believe in making the slaves of the castle work any harder than they already do." Harry smiled at the answer while Albus' eyes belied he was amused by the response as well. The other wizards around the table were a combination of appalled and insulted by the insinuation but not a single one could provide a valid counterpoint and they slowly quieted down to only simmering indignation at Hermione's claims. Harry ordered a club sandwich and Hermione had gotten a roast beef sandwich. They enjoyed their meal in quiet companionship as they held hands underneath the table and shared several private laughs as they observed the various people in the hall.

Hermione was simply glowing with happiness as she had put the earlier confrontation with Ron behind her. She knew that she wouldn't feel so at ease dressed like she was in front of everyone unless she was with Harry. Harry had the ability to make seemingly extraordinary things seem rather ordinary.

She had been wondering a lot lately about when he had told her that she was the 1st person to ever tell him that they loved him and how such a horrible statement couldn't be true, could it? Surely he must have been exaggerating and yet with Harry and the genuine look on his face when he said it she found herself horrified that it could actually be the truth. She knew now wasn't the time to be thinking about something so heavy and sad so she deposited it in the back of her mind and prepared herself to enjoy the remainder of the night.

Harry was basking in the glow of Hermione as they sat and discussed what they had gotten his godfather for Christmas. Hermione had gotten him a very nice knife that would be useful while Sirius was still on the lam. Harry had gotten Sirius a necklace that when transfiguration takes place while wearing it the necklace would be

transformed into a dog chain complete with a fake registration and owner. Harry had made the gift after researching the necessary charms and transfigurations to make it possible.

After they finished their sandwiches, they sat in silence while they listened to Fleur complain about everything Hogwarts to Roger Davies who was so obviously enamored with her that all he could do is nod dumbly while his brain was working overtime to prevent him from drooling.

Finally the champions and their dates took the dance floor for the ceremonial opening dance. The hours they had put in practicing various different steps immediately showed themselves. Harry and Hermione gracefully twirled along the floor as the other champions tried to match the effort but were failing miserably. Even Fleur was being upstaged as she was desperately trying to get her love sick date to snap out of the trance that she had placed him under.

Most of the students watched in awe as Harry Potter the shy and awkward Gryffindor shed all of those traits as did his bookish and plain looking dance partner. They had been transformed for the night into an elegant couple that were both beautiful and graceful. They were the belles of the ball and it had just begun.

Eventually the opening dance ended and the floor flooded with the other students with several other students wishing to break in. Harry and Hermione merely ignored them as they continued to dance to whatever song came up. After they had danced for an hour Hermione decided they needed a break so Harry volunteered to grab some drinks for them.

Hermione came out of the crowd and was dismayed as she spotted a scowling Ron sitting at a table in the back of the hall with an exasperated Parvati. Hermione tried to walk past them without Ron noticing but he couldn't avoid saying something decidedly Malfoyish as he said, "What's the matter mudblood, your partner finally get the good sense to leave the dance." Soon after Parvati had soundly slapped Ron and left a glowing red handprint on his face.

Parvati sneered at the staggered redhead before she said, "The only reason I agreed to go to the ball with such a childish jerk is because I

know Harry wanted you to have a date so you wouldn't feel left out. Now I wonder why he would be so thoughtful to someone so childish."

Hermione smiled warmly at Parvati thinking her words got right to the heart of the matter before Harry returned and exchanged a worried glance with Hermione. She reassured him with a smile and they went and sat down at another table with Neville and Ginny.

The remainder of the evening was very pleasant as Harry and Hermione did eventually dance with someone else as they switched with Ginny and Neville for a few songs. Neville and Ginny appeared to both be enjoying the others company which surprised Harry a little because Neville was typically so timid but tonight he had been very amiable and at ease with himself. Harry found he enjoyed Neville's company much more than he ever did with Ron because Neville seemed to have a quality that he never attempted to intimidate anyone when he was talked to and made the other person feel at ease accordingly when he did talk.

Harry led Hermione back to the common room and they shared a short kiss on the lips before they went to sleep for the night in their respective beds. Aside from Ronald Weasley's swan song signaling the end of their friendship, it had been a perfect night.

A/N: Please Review and tell me what you think. Ron has effectively ended his friendships with Harry and Hermione but that doesn't mean they'll be enemies. This also gives Ron the opportunity to prove himself outside of Harry's shadow we'll see what he does with it.

Chapter 4

The day after the Yule Ball led to some unusual fall out for Ron Weasley. The vast majority of Gryffindor house refused to speak to him and those that did managed to say some very unflattering things about the youngest Weasley male.

Ginny and the twins had sent word of Ron's exploits to their mother who immediately sent apology letters to Harry and Hermione indicating that they were still welcome at the Burrow and whenever they were there Ron would be kept away from them with threat of disownment. Molly had spent the majority of the letter apologizing to Hermione about Ron's use of mudblood and how he had never heard another Weasley utter such rubbish. Harry was apologized to again about the November incident and Mrs. Weasley offered her approval to bring charges against Ron if he wanted.

They also received their usual Weasley sweaters that had been strangely absent during Christmas with yet another apology involving a misunderstanding regarding Ron. Harry and Hermione found the entire thing to be a bit excessive, but they really couldn't argue with Molly as to how she punished her own child.

Professor McGonagall on the other hand had given Ron detention for the rest of the year every night with Snape or Filch. Hermione pondered if Ron might actually learn something in potions given that he would have to clean and organize every single ingredient in Snape's stores.

Professor McGonagall had also told Ron under no conditions would he ever be a prefect or head boy and if he was well behaved he could still participate in Quidditch. Hermione postulated that Harry would have to be the male fifth year Gryffindor prefect if Ron was no longer in the running, which excited her for some strange reason that Harry didn't entirely understand.

Unfortunately the day after Boxing Day, Rita Skeeter struck again, as she touted Hagrid as being a half-giant, and therefore by insinuation, unfit to teach children. Thanks to the prejudice in the ministry and that

of the purebloods Hagrid was dismissed as COMC professor while he still retained his position as keeper of the keys.

It became readily apparent who had arranged the entire thing as they had their first COMC class following the break. Malfoy and his cronies were particularly merciless as they taunted Harry and Hermione about both Ron's exile and Hagrid's firing. Malfoy sneered, "What's the problem Scarhead, you look like you've lost your pet weasel and favorite professor. What a *giant* mistake that muggle loving fool made to hire him in the first place."

Harry was about to explode at Malfoy but that persistent voice in his head told him to just not listen and Malfoy would lose his power over him. Hermione watched Harry's facial expressions change from enraged to calm in a short time and was amazed as Harry merely asked the professor to elaborate on the flobberworms they were studying.

Hermione had a hard time not showing her appreciation to Harry on the spot, as he exercised what must have been an extremely large amount of self-control, and he rightfully deserved to be rewarded for it. After class was dismissed Hermione whispered to him, "Harry I'm very proud that you were able to take the high road with Malfoy."

Harry sighed and replied, "I just figured that if you ignore Malfoy's taunting he loses the small amount of power he has."

Hermione gave Harry an appraising look and said, "That's very insightful of you Harry." She gave Harry a peck on the cheek as they walked hand in hand back to the castle.

The following days they fell into a routine and by the end of the week Malfoy had grown so frustrated that he had tried to hex Harry in the back and even Snape had penalized him points and given him detention. Hermione and Harry had given up on S.P.E.W. in its current incarnation and planned to change its approach a little for the next year and try again. Hermione had also finally decided to write her parents to indicate that she had a boyfriend and that it was Harry. She figured as much as she had talked about Harry in the past to her parents it would go over better than if it was some boy they had never heard of.

Mum and Dad,

I'm sorry that I haven't written since Christmas but I have been busy. When I see you at the end of the term I can more accurately describe the year.

As I told you my friend Harry, was placed into a tournament for older wizards so I have been helping him every day with preparation for the tasks. Harry and I have grown much closer this year and he has grown up a lot since last year. It all culminated when he asked me to go to the Yule Ball as his date. I accepted as I indicated in our last letter and had a wonderful time with Harry.

Unfortunately, our other best friend Ron however has seemingly developed the social skills of a four year old this year and we finally had enough of his foolishness after he beat Harry up on a whim and then said some very unflattering things to me.

Anyways Mum, the ball was so amazing and like I told you I have liked Harry for a little while and he was such a gentleman at the ball. He treats me so well and appreciates me for who I am. We've even started studying together and his marks are really going up. He has been tutoring me in DADA because it is the one class where someone gets better marks than me, and it just so happens to be Harry.

Like I said we have been spending a lot of time together, and he asked me to be his girlfriend. Dad don't worry we've only kissed like five times in a month. Actually, I think Harry might have some problems with too much physical contact, because he told me that no one had ever told him that they loved him before I told him earlier this year. The way his dreadful relatives treat him I wouldn't be surprised.

Mum any suggestions you have as to how I can get him to open up to me more as far as hugs and kissing go would be appreciated. Don't worry dad, like I said he is a gentleman, so any thing that happens I'll start and he would probably be too embarrassed to try anything too forward.

I guess to close my letter I will say that Harry still has two tasks left in the tournament, so I will be busy helping him with them. I'll write again when I get a chance. Harry and Crookshanks say Hi also.

Love,

Hermione

Later that week Hedwig returned from delivering the letter as Harry had made a point to keep his friend busier this year than he had in the past.

Hermione,

We were delighted to find a beautiful owl setting outside our house when we got back from work this past week. Based upon your descriptions we assume this is Harry's owl Hedwig.

We are both happy that you and Harry have gotten together. He sounds like an outstanding young man if your letters over the years do him any justice. Tell him to be careful in that tournament from us, because anyone who treats our daughter so well deserves more than just you to be looking out for him.

That being said, your father and I would like to meet Harry at the station this year and perhaps have him over some time this summer. As far as his relatives go I suggest you go to the headmaster without Harry, but only after you explain to him your intentions so he doesn't feel like you are betraying his trust. There is no reason that any child should grow up without being told he is loved.

From the sounds of things Harry has become an outstanding young man despite his upbringing and deserves a positive adult presence this summer. You told us he has a godfather perhaps he can live with him during the summers?

Take good care of yourself and Harry, and we'll be awaiting your next letter. Tell Crookshanks and Harry that we say hi also.

Love,

Mum and Dad

Hermione had brought up her parents' suggestion to Harry who merely shrugged and said, "You are more than welcome to try Hermione. I've told him about it before and he tells me it can't be helped."

Soon after, a very angry Hermione asked Professor McGonagall if she could talk to the headmaster about some business regarding Harry. Hermione made her way into the headmaster's office and was greeted by the old wizard with his standard, "Hello Ms. Granger, Minerva said this pertains to Harry?"

Hermione calmed herself before she said, "Yes headmaster, I was wondering what you know about his relatives and how they have treated him?"

Dumbledore slid his glasses up his nose before he said, "Honestly, Harry has said they treat him rather poorly. I am actually impressed he has developed into the young man he has despite the fact."

Hermione scoffed indignation before she said, "Headmaster did you know that Harry told me no one had ever told him that they loved him until I did earlier this year?"

Albus frowned and said, "I was unaware of this fact Ms. Granger. That is a rather sad thing to hear. Surely his aunt must have said it before to him?"

Hermione shook her head emphatically and said, "Professor have you seen the clothes that Harry wears under his robes?"

Albus still frowning replied, "Yes I am aware they are inadequate, but I thought that was the style for young people."

Hermione sighed and said, "Professor, Harry's shoes are held together by tape and he really has no clothes that fit him at all. Surely you know what that does to a person's self-confidence over time."

Albus sighed and replied, "Yes I see where you are going with this Ms. Granger." Dumbledore suddenly looked every bit of his 150 years as

he said, "I originally placed Harry with the Dursleys because of the protections in place thanks to his mother's sacrifice. Unfortunately, it appears as though I neglected to account for other dangers that Harry might have been placed under. I was aware the Dursleys detested the presence of anything magical but I assumed their prejudices wouldn't extend to a mere child."

Hermione smiled sadly her anger long ago forgotten as she replied, "People make mistakes Professor Dumbledore, but the question is how will you fix it?"

Dumbledore straightened up in his chair and firmly said, "Now that you have brought all of this to my attention it is quite apparent that Harry has been neglected by his relatives. I will see into new accommodations this summer for Harry. In a perfect world he would be living with Sirius but alas, it is not a perfect world. I assure you that either I will push for adoption of Harry myself, or someone who Harry approves of will take him as a charge. I do believe that the Weasley's would take him in a heartbeat but I am sorry to hear young Ronald has been a very poor friend this year at the sake of his friendship with both you and Harry."

Hermione nodded and said, "Yes sir, unfortunately that is correct. But as a by-product Harry and I have become friendlier with many other students in our house so we have made a fair share of closer friends as a result."

Albus nodded as his eyes began twinkling again before he said, "I believe Harry can have the boots he had borrowed earlier this year as a replacement for his regular shoes if that is acceptable." Hermione nodded happily before Dumbledore smiled and continued, "You are to be commended for caring enough about Harry to bring this to my attention. I am afraid I have allowed this to continue for too long and I must rectify my error before the summer. If that is all, I have to attend to some paperwork to get the proverbial ball rolling on this matter." Hermione nodded happily and was dismissed from the office as she nearly ran all of the way back to Harry in the common room.

Harry meanwhile had been trying to figure out the secret of the egg and had tried several more times to open the egg in different ways

and had yet to get beyond the screeching of the egg. Harry glanced up as a very upbeat Hermione entered the room with a pair of boots in her hands and nearly skipped over to Harry before she said, "Oh Harry guess what?"

Harry cheekily replied, "Um, you found some boots in the hall after your meeting with Dumbledore?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and replied, "No Harry, the headmaster has given you these boots that borrowed earlier for the first task because he thought you deserved something nicer to wear on your feet."

Harry smiled brightly and replied, "Wow do you really mean it? Oh this is so cool."

Hermione smiled and said, "That's not even the best news though Harry. He also said that under no conditions would you be returning to the Dursleys ever again."

Harry gaped for a moment before he crushed Hermione in a hug and twirled her through the air. Hermione giggled before Harry broke the hug and kissed her on the cheek. Harry finally vocalized how he felt when he said, "So who will I be staying with then?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders and replied, "He doesn't know yet but he said he would take you in if he couldn't find someone else that you would approve of."

Harry's smile dimmed a very little when he replied, "I wish I could live with Sirius."

Hermione sighed and replied, "Well maybe he will be cleared before the summer and you can. That would be so good for you Harry if it happened. But, the headmaster would take good care of you too so things will be getting better no matter what."

Harry smiled and simply said, "I love you so much 'Mione."

Hermione smiled and replied, "What did you call me Harry?"

Harry arched his eyebrow and replied, "Um I called you Hermione."

Hermione smiled and shook her head before she said, "No you said 'Mione."

Harry sheepishly replied, "Oh I'm sorry Hermione; I know how you hate people giving you nicknames."

Hermione still smiling shook her head and said, "No I like that. But only you can call me it, and don't use it too much or it will lose its meaning."

Harry smiled and said, "Ok Hermione I'll remember that. While your here can I update you on my progress with the egg?"

Hermione nodded and Harry continued, "Well I've opened every way I can think of and I still can't make out anything, except something screaming at me, when I do open it."

Hermione nodded and replied, "Well, all we can do is keep working and hope it comes to us."

Harry nodded and they worked on some homework for the rest of the day. That night they decided to visit Hagrid who had been inconspicuously absent since the article. Harry and Hermione made their way down to Hagrid's hut and heard what appeared to be sobbing. Hermione knocked on the door and got no answer. Harry knocked and said, "Hagrid it's Hermione and me, let us in so we can talk please."

Hagrid opened the door and reeked of firewhiskey and looked like he had been crying for days. Hagrid let Harry and Hermione inside and Hermione offered to make them all some tea as she got the firewhiskey out of Hagrid's hand. Harry softly said to the half giant, "Hagrid, Hermione and I just wanted you to know that we could care less if you mother was a giant or not. There are lots of other people who feel the same way so feeling sorry for yourself and drinking away your problems isn't helping anything. In fact, you are letting Malfoy and Rita Skeeter win if you do this."

Hagrid blew his nose on his handkerchief before he said, "Yer right 'Arry I'll be out and about tomorrow I swear to yeh." Hermione returned with the tea as they discussed the 2nd task and what the

clue of the egg might be. Hagrid suggested they try to open the egg underwater and Harry and Hermione both thanked Hagrid for the new idea and planned on doing it the next time they had a chance to.

The next day was to be a Hogsmeade weekend as Harry and Hermione planned on having a quiet date of going through the bookstore and having some food at the three broomsticks.

Harry and Hermione caught a carriage with Neville and Ginny who had also become a couple following the Yule Ball. Neville had really broken out of his social shell and had become increasingly amiable and popular since the ball. Harry and Hermione went into the bookstore first and each found books they were interested in reading. Harry was thumbing through some books when he came across a book called *Wizards and Mental Magics* the voice in his head told him to buy the book as Hermione had found a book on charms to be used on books and letters to ensure secrecy. Hermione immediately was interested in Harry's book but Harry decided to read it 1st and then they could switch books.

They next went to Madame Puddifoot's after seeing how busy the Three Broomsticks was. Typically neither Harry nor Hermione would be found dead in the place but since they were technically on a date they made an allowance for it. They enjoyed some tea as they held hands and talked about when they should try to open the egg and all of their other classes. Harry had been indicating recently that he wanted to try to become an animagus and Hermione was receptive to trying it herself. Finally they finished their tea and made their way back to the carriages and once again sat with Neville and Ginny as they all discussed the events of the day and shared some laughs about Malfoy and how desperate he had become without Harry to provoke anymore.

The next day Harry took his break right after COMC with Professor Grubbly-Plank, to take the egg that he had brought in the bag and dip his head underwater with it as he opened it. When he was sure no one was watching he dipped his head in the great lake and opened the egg. Harry was surprised to find that the egg wasn't screeching. In fact the egg kept repeating a song.

*Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above ground,
And while you're searching, ponder this:
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,
An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour—the prospect's block,
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back*

Harry pulled his head out the frigid water and quickly wrote down the song, as he had memorized it, on a spare piece of parchment. Harry ran back to the castle proud that he had finally solved how to hear the clue for the second task, and now he only had to figure out what it meant and then prepare for it.

A/N: Review and tell me what you think. Next chapter will be action packed as Harry deals with the second task and he has a little present from Voldemort. Keep reading and keep up the great reviews.

Chapter 5

Harry met Hermione in the Great Hall and discussed the clue that Harry had found. Hermione suggested they deal with that problem later. Harry agreed and went to take a bite out of his mincemeat pie when his scar flashed with white hot pain and Harry heard Hermione scream before he blacked out.

Harry awoke in the hospital wing and his head felt like it had been beaten in with a baseball bat. He grabbed his glasses and focused in on two people standing by his bed, Hermione and Dumbledore. Harry tiredly asked, "Sir my scar hurt worse than it ever has before, and then I blacked out. Do you have any idea why that might be?"

Dumbledore peered over his glasses as he said, "Harry I believe your scar is a connection to Lord Voldemort. Your scar is hurting because Voldemort is growing stronger, and as Sirius has told me, you have had visions from his perspective as that correct?"

Harry nodded and said, "Yes sir, that's pretty much all I know about it."

Albus nodded and replied, "Well Harry I believe you might have to start a specific type of training next year with Professor Snape if you can not find another solution beforehand. I recommend you try some reading on the topic of mind magics. The primary reason for this is to block your connection with Tom by protecting your mind from his presence. I am sure Ms. Granger can help you in this quest." Harry nodded immediately thinking back to his fortune at having picked the book up at the last Hogsmeade trip.

Hermione finally took Harry's hand, and gave it a soft squeeze before she said, "Madam Pomfrey told me that whenever you feel that you're up to leaving the hospital wing you can." Harry nodded and sat up. He got out of the bed with Dumbledore and Hermione's help and after he steadied himself he walked by himself as he held Hermione's hand as they made their way up towards the library.

As they sat in the library Hermione went over the riddle for what seemed to be the 100th time. Hermione asked, "Ok so tell me the first line again."

Harry sighed and said, "Come seek us where our voices sound."

Hermione nodded and replied, "Ok so we've narrowed that down to meaning mermaids and the lake. Next line please."

Harry repeated in monotone, "We cannot sing above the ground."

Hermione nodded and said. "Yes same thing. Moving on." As she motioned with her hands for Harry to pick up the pace.

Harry smiled tiredly and said, "And while your searching ponder this, we've taken what you'll sorely miss."

Hermione nodded and said, "Well as far as we've been able to tell that could mean an object as you have guessed or I have guessed it could mean a person close to you. My alternative is certainly the most problematic but it would seem to make more sense based upon the inherent danger of the tasks. Ok next verse please."

Harry said, "An hour long you'll have to look, And to recover what we took."

Hermione nodded and said, "This is rather obvious. You have an hour underwater to rescue most likely me. Now we just need a way that you can stay underwater for an hour. Last verse please, love."

Harry smiled at the term of endearment before he yawned then said, "But past an hour—the prospect's block, Too late, it's gone, it won't come back."

Hermione nodded and said, "If you don't rescue me in an hour you'll lose the task and maybe me."

Harry sighed and said, "Something truly tells me that Dumbledore wouldn't let anyone die out there."

Hermione nodded before she looked Harry straight in the eye and said, "Will you be willing to take that chance?"

Harry shook his head and said, "Mione you know I'd never leave you down there so don't worry about it. But we do need to find a way that I can stay underwater for an hour without drowning that is."

Hermione frowned before she said, "Well, there is always the bubblehead charm but if your bubble gets popped while underwater you are kind of bollixed."

As they pondered Neville came up to them in the library with a handful of Herbology books in his hands before he asked, "Hey guys any luck on the clue yet?"

Harry shook his head and yawned again before he said. "No Neville we are trying to find a way to allow me to stay underwater for an hour without drowning."

Neville smiled and said, "Why don't you try Gillyweed?"

Hermione's face lit up as she stood and gave Neville a big hug before she turned to Harry and said, "Oh Harry that's it. You can use Gillyweed and you grow gills and webbed hands and feet so you can swim faster than the other champions underwater.'

Harry smiled at Neville and said, "Thanks Neville, you're a lifesaver. I was thinking Hermione might just kill me now and be done with it and if she doesn't succeed my sleep deprivation and this headache I've been sporting since lunch might just do the trick."

Hermione worriedly looked at Harry and said, "Harry you never told me you had a headache. I thought you were fine when you got out of the hospital wing." Harry shook his head and Hermione's eyes filled with tears before she said, "Oh Harry I never would have kept you up here if you were hurting. You should have told me."

Harry smiled a little and replied, "Hermione, I've built a pretty high pain threshold in my life, so I think I can manage with this. But, I might have had a mutiny in a little bit if Neville hadn't saved the day."

Hermione smiled and said, "Ok Harry, but I want you to tell me these things so I can take care of you ok?"

Harry nodded as he began to return all of the books they had removed from the shelves. Hermione took the break to ask Neville, "So where can we get some Gillyweed?"

Neville shrugged and replied, "Well it is kind of rare so we don't have any in the greenhouse. Professor Snape probably has some but I wouldn't recommend even asking him. Maybe Harry can get Dobby to find him some?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Yes maybe Dobby can help."

Harry returned and saw Hermione eyeing him oddly before she said. "Harry, can you get Dobby to come here for a minute?"

Harry nodded and said, "Dobby can you help me for a second."

The little elf arrived with a pop and said, "Dobby is helping Harry Potter anyway he needs."

Harry smiled at the almost reluctant look on Hermione's face before he asked, "Dobby could you get me some Gillyweed please?"

Dobby smiled and said, "Harry Potter he is so kind he is asking Dobby please to do something." With a soft pop Dobby disappeared and with a soft pop, a minute later, he returned with a bag full of Gillyweed. Dobby said, "Harry Potter is wanting Gillyweed and Dobby is getting it for Mr. Harry Potter sir."

Dobby handed Harry the bag, and Harry glanced at Neville who said, "That should be plenty Harry and it should keep fine for the next couple of weeks until the task." Harry nodded and thanked Dobby who disappeared with a soft pop.

The next week went by quickly as Harry began to read his mind magics book and had learned that Occlumency is the art of blocking one's mind from an attack. The opposite art is called legilimency and it involves the process of attacking another's mind to view their thoughts and memories.

Harry had begun the process of creating a primary defense by clearing his mind whenever he had the time. Classes continued to progress nicely, as Harry's assignments were always O's and E's thanks to Hermione's encouragement even though Harry did his work without her help. Harry had also elected to take exams despite the fact that he wasn't required to take them. Harry had also convinced McGonagall, after a fair amount of groveling, to give him an entrance exam to take Ancient Runes and Arithmancy in his fifth year.

Ron's exile continued in Gryffindor house even though Harry and Hermione really didn't hold any hard feelings because the rest of their friends were doing it for them. Ginny and the twins pranked Ron mercilessly for several days and it only ended when Harry and Hermione asked for mercy for their former best friend. Ron was truly miserable and he only had himself to blame. Ron's grades suffered greatly without Hermione's help as his grades in all of his classes dropped to A's and P's. Potions in particular became the bane of his existence, as Snape had seemed to unite with Gryffindor house in making Ron's life miserable.

The Potter Stinks badges that were very visible before the 1st task had disappeared and Hogwarts was equally behind both of its champions. Harry felt a lot more confident going in to the 2nd task and his sleep and eating habits indicated as much.

Finally, the night before the second task Harry and Hermione were working on their potions essay that Snape, despite the fact that the second task was that weekend and many students would be hard pressed to find the time to do it all, had assigned. As they sat in the common room Professor McGonagall entered the room and immediately spotted Hermione as she softly said, "Ms. Granger if you would be so kind as to accompany me."

Hermione glanced at Harry concernedly as Harry reassured her with a smile before he said, "I'll take care of your books ok 'Mione?" Hermione relaxed when she heard Harry say her nickname and she left the common room with a wave as Professor McGonagall shot Harry a sympathetic glance and exited behind her favorite student.

Harry finished his essay and continued his work on Occlumency. Harry had sent Sirius a letter the previous week indicating he had started working on Occlumency to which Sirius fully supported as an excellent skill to possess. Sirius promised Harry that he would see him the next Hogsmeade weekend if he followed the signs. Harry told Hermione that he would stop writing Sirius if he truly started writing letters like Dumbledore spoke.

Harry had found Occlumency to be quite helpful in organizing his thoughts, which helped his marks as well. He continued to work hard as the second task neared and had successfully finished building his primary shields to guard against an initial attack. Upon finishing his primary defenses Harry begun the second step of Occlumency, which involved organizing his memories by their importance and then constructing shields around important memories as a series of secondary shields were created.

Harry finally went to sleep around midnight as he stole a glance at Ron's bed, which had already seen its share of abuse in the recent weeks and months. Harry shook his head sadly at his former best friend's bed thinking that last year at this same time he would have been rescuing Ron instead of Hermione. Harry was happy he had gotten together with Hermione but was still saddened that Ron hadn't grown up enough to accept responsibility for his actions and to live up to his obligations. Soon Harry cleared his mind from the pointless train of thought and went to bed.

Harry awoke the next morning around 7:30 and realized he had 3 ½ hours until the 2nd task was to begin. Harry put on his trunks and shorts that he had been given for the 2nd task and put on some of Dudley's old sweatpants as he put the Gillyweed in his pocket. Harry placed his wand in the nice holster that Neville had gotten him for Christmas and made his way down to the great hall to grab something light to eat before the task.

Harry enjoyed a quiet breakfast as he read Hermione's prophet for the day that the owl had given to Harry. It had a preview of the second task and was described as being a true test of each champion's moral compass. Harry smirked as he read the article and then went through the Quiditch season preview. Harry snorted when

he read that the Cannons were predicted to finish in last place again before he checked to see where Puddlemere was predicted to finish. Eventually, Neville joined Harry as he continued to nurse his tea and read the paper. Neville simply asked, "So Harry, are you ready for today?"

Harry glanced up from the paper and smiled before he said, "Well Neville I am feeling a lot better about this task than the 1st one thanks to your help."

Neville smiled and said, "Harry you'd do the same for me. Mind if I walk you down to the dock?"

Harry shook his head and said, "Not at all Neville. Actually, I should probably start making my way down there. Can you hold on to the paper for me and watch my clothes when the task starts?"

Neville nodded as they stood and made their way out of the castle as they chatted about Quidditch season and also the most recent Herbology assignment.

Harry made his way down to the lake and watched in amusement as the twins walked by taking odds on what champion would win the task. Harry was amazed to see he had gathered the best odds for the task thanks to his strong showing in the first task.

Harry and Neville made their way down to the lake and Harry was surprised to be the first champion present. Neville went to sit with the other spectators as Harry sat down and did his meditative breathing. Harry also took the time to work on his secondary shields some more as Harry's mind continued to become more and more fortified.

Eventually Harry was broken from his breathing as someone gently shook his shoulder. Harry opened his eyes and could see Cedric Diggory looking at him with concern. Cedric said, "Harry mate, you looked like you were sleeping there."

Harry smiled and said, "Oh I'm just relaxed and ready to go out for a leisurely swim, you know?"

Cedric shook his head and laughed as he said, "Harry you are barmy mate."

Harry laughed and got to his feet to see that the stands had filled up and all of the champions were in position to start the task. Harry quickly shed his sweatpants and grabbed enough of the Gillyweed to last an hour just as Neville had shown him.

Ludo Bagman came forward and used *sonorus* as he announced, "Champions, you each have had a precious treasure taken from you. You have one hour to retrieve your treasure and bring it back to the surface or no points will be awarded. At the sound of the gun you may start."

Harry grabbed his Gillyweed and swallowed it down despite its slimy texture. Harry began to feel light headed like he hadn't actually breathed for a little while as he heard the gun sound. Harry dived into the water and immediately felt refreshed as he realized he couldn't breathe earlier because he had grown gills and webbed appendages.

Harry dived deep into the lake and left the other champions behind in his wake. Harry followed the faint singing he heard of the merpeople confident that they were to follow its melody.

Harry followed the singing into a thick bed of seaweed when he suddenly felt several small hands reach out and grab at his arms and legs. Harry pulled out his wand and used a silent *stupefy* a few times to limited success doing nothing more than freeing his arms and legs but he eventually gained enough space to swim through the seaweed and back into the open.

The singing of the merpeople continued to grow louder until Harry reached the remnants of a shipwreck. Harry quickly scanned the area of the sunken ship for any threats, before he swam over the ship and was amazed to see the pale visages of the four champions' treasures.

Hermione, Cho Chang, an older man who must have been Krum's father, and a young blonde girl who must have been Fleur's sister were all floating peacefully in the water chained to large rocks holding them underwater. The entire area was surrounded by merpeople and Harry immediately went to Hermione and cut her free from her

bounds. Not accustomed to casting spells silently or underwater he used a carefully placed cutting hex that did the trick quite nicely. Harry glanced at his watch to see how much time he had left out of his hour before he remembered that he had forgotten to use the bubble head charm to protect his watch. Cursing himself for forgetting something so important he berated himself for a moment before scanning the waters once again. The only indication he had that the hour was not yet up was that no other champions had yet arrived for their treasure.

Harry shrugged after a moment of waiting for some sign of another champion and he began kicking his legs slowly as he glanced around one last time for a sign of the other champions. Finally, convinced he had waited long enough he began ascending to the surface with Hermione, and soon they reached the surface to a slightly startled but hysteric crowd. Hermione had broken out of her magically induced sleep upon reaching the surface, and immediately found Harry and clung to him as though her very existence depended upon it.

The judges were all quite startled that Harry had already finished when he helped Hermione onto the dock as he sat in the water waiting for his Gillyweed to wear down. Hermione was wrapped in a towel as she started to ask Harry rapid-fire questions about what had happened in the task. Harry chuckled as he attempted to answer Hermione's questions.

A few minutes later during which Harry suffered through Hermione's questions, Neville and a few other Gryffindors joined the couple on the dock. Finally another champion arrived when Cedric surfaced with Cho, and the Hufflepuff merely shook his head in wonder when he saw that Harry had already finished. Krum and his father came up next, as Viktor gave Harry a respectful nod once he spotted him. Finally, Fleur made her way to the surface with her sister but appeared to have been injured by the Grindylows somewhat seriously. Madam Pomfrey immediately took Fleur to the infirmary to have her treated. Harry was awarded 1st place for the task and had built a nice one minute advantage over Cedric after Crouch announced that for every point Harry was ahead he would be given a five second advantage over the closest competitor.

Harry finally pulled himself out of the water and was understandably cold as Hermione wrapped him up into a hug and towel as she said something like, "Use my body to heat yours." Harry had no real objections to Hermione pressing herself against him all the way back up to the castle but Harry suspected it was as much for her comfort as his own.

Harry was given a hero's procession all the way back to the castle as Hermione kept swatting at a particularly persistent water beetle. Hermione eventually mentioned it to Harry when she said, "It is awfully cool out to have a water beetle flying around isn't it Harry?"

Harry more concentrated on Hermione's body pressed to his own, than any beetle merely said, "Yes it is quite cool out."

Hermione snorted and replied, "Harry, are you sure you could breathe underwater, because you are acting a little oxygen deprived."

Harry remained too concentrated on the hug to even reply this time as Hermione simply said with a slight grin, "You boys really do have one track minds."

A/N: There is the second task. Next chapter involves piecing together the mystery of Rita Skeeter, Snape and Malfoy finally come out of the woodwork next chapter too.

Chapter 6

The next morning Harry and Hermione were enjoying breakfast in the great hall, on a quiet Sunday morning, when the owls brought in the Sunday edition of the prophet. Hermione paid the owl and as Harry sipped on his tea. It only took a moment before Hermione's face became beat red and she screamed, "Rita Skeeter needs to be stopped."

Harry glanced at Hermione and gestured to get the paper, which she crumpled up and threw at Harry before looking apologetically at Harry and mouthing sorry.

Hogwarts Golden Couple or Teacher's Pets

By: Rita Skeeter

It has come to this reporter's attention that Harry Potter and his muggleborn girlfriend Hermione Granger have long been the beneficiaries of favorable treatment from the headmaster and his deputy headmistress.

Fellow Hogwarts student Draco Malfoy replied when asked for comment, "Potter is such a celebrity that he gets away with things that would result in expulsion for normal students. I for one think it sends a bad message to the rest of the student body when celebrity is more important than anything else."

In regards to Granger, it is commonly held that she is the brightest witch of her age at Hogwarts. Yet there have been serious accusations of grade impropriety made, as commented by Pansy Parkinson a fellow student, "Oh Granger acts like such a goody goody most of the time. But even an idiot can see that she follows the coat tails of Potter and gets good grades because of it. I mean, how else can you explain a mudblood getting better grades than a pureblood? I for one think it's high time the ministry step in and do something about it."

In this humble reporter's opinion if such behavior continues at Hogwarts, parents should be concerned that perhaps the one time pinnacle of magical education has fallen upon hard times.

Harry sighed and ran his hand through his hair before he carefully folded the crumpled paper back to its original form and stood up and walked towards the staff table.

Harry approached the headmaster quietly and said, "Sir, would it be possible to threaten the prophet with some legal action if they don't print up an apology on the front page of the prophet tomorrow with evidence refuting these ridiculous claims. If they don't comply, I will contact Gringott's about some solicitors upon my and Hermione's behalf." Albus smiled and nodded without saying a word but his eyes communicated his delight with how Harry was handling the situation.

Harry returned to the table as a still slightly apologetic Hermione was glancing at him. Harry smiled and pulled her into a hug before he said, "Something tells me that we will have a ringing endorsement from the prophet for a while now following that little stunt. If they don't they'll be under new management." Harry smiled slightly and added, "Make sure you write your parents in case they catch wind of it. This way, at least your parents can be prepared if they do hear about it."

Hermione quickly scribbled a note down on a piece of paper briefly stating that Harry had won the second task and now there was another unsavory article published about them in the paper and Harry had taken care of it. Hermione returned from a quick trip to the owlery and said, "Harry, remind me to never get on your bad side."

Harry smiled and replied, "Well Hermione, I doubt you will ever have to worry about it. I usually give most people enough opportunities so they never have to deal with me when I'm like this. I never told you this before, but the sorting hat wanted to put me into Slytherin first year. Sometimes I think that I might have been better suited there too aside from the fact that Malfoy is there."

Hermione chuckled and replied, "Well Harry, I never told anyone else but the hat wanted to put me into Ravenclaw and I had to beg it to put me into Gryffindor where I knew the cute black haired boy with the glasses would be sorted." Hermione finished her statement with a

flush, and at that moment Harry thought he had never seen a more beautiful thing in his life than Hermione.

The remainder of the day went by smoothly as few students put any stock in the prophet's claims and fewer of those that did, made any notice of the fact to Harry and Hermione. For once Harry didn't have any specific preparation for the upcoming task to work on, and accordingly he continued his work on Occlumency. Unfortunately, he soon realized that he would need to have his defenses tested by an accomplished Legilimens to see how effective the shields were that he had constructed.

Classes continued on at an even pace as the professors were working their way towards finals. Potions had been the one dark spot of all of their classes. One week Snape had set forth their task to make sleeping draught as Harry, Hermione, and Neville now shared a table after Ron's fall from grace.

Harry and Hermione were each working separately in their cauldrons with Hermione giving the occasional tip to Neville. Draco Malfoy who had long abandoned his potion because he would get an O on it regardless, began his daily attempt of trying to get under the boy-who-lived's skin.

"So Potter you traded in your pet weasel for a squib, how typical of you." Malfoy said with a smirk.

Harry meanwhile was ignoring everything Malfoy said per usual as Snape watched with a guarded expression. Finally, Malfoy had enough and walked up to Harry and flicked his wand floating Harry's cauldron above him and dumping his just completed potion all over Harry.

Malfoy may have been a mediocre potions student but he knew that topically applying certain potions multiplied their typical strength several times over. Unfortunately for Harry the sleeping draught was once such potion. Hermione watched Harry slump to the ground as he was doused in the potion and before she could scream Snape was upon Harry sitting him up and pouring several vials of potions down his throat.

Finally, Hermione gathered herself and quietly asked, "Professor Snape is Harry going to be ok?"

Snape sighed and said, "Ms. Granger I am afraid I do not have the answer to that. I can assure you that Mr. Malfoy has brewed his last potion at Hogwarts, and he will never be prefect or head boy, especially while I still teach here." Snape used *mobillicorpus* and floated Harry out of the dungeon up towards the hospital wing. Hermione followed obediently behind, as she was too shocked to cry or be upset. She had just sat and watched as Draco Malfoy had doused her boyfriend with a potentially fatal dose of sleeping draught and she had been unable to do anything other than watch.

Severus Snape levitated Harry into the hospital wing and a very concerned Madam Pomfrey quickly asked, "Severus what has happened to Mr. Potter, he doesn't appear to be breathing."

Severus spoke quickly and said, "Mr. Malfoy doused Mr. Potter in sleeping draught intentionally and I forced as much as the anti-dote as I had in my stores into his system as soon as it happened. I am not sure if it will be enough."

Hermione watched the conversation and dropped to her knees, her eyes were no longer focusing on anything, and they were just staring off into the distance. Madam Pomfrey tried to get her to snap out of it as she had Snape work more potions into Harry's system. Harry was still blue and had a very weak pulse as Madam Pomfrey placed the other student into the bed next to Harry's as she had obviously went into shock herself.

Dumbledore had rushed to the hospital wing as quickly as he could when the castle had told him a student was near death. He was shocked when he entered the room and spotted Severus forcing potions down Harry's throat frantically, as the boy appeared to be nearly blue, it was as though his body had ceased to take in oxygen.

Severus Snape looked up startled as he continued to administer the potions until there were no more. Snape didn't care for the Potter boy but he would be damned if a student died in his class and more accurately was murdered by a student that he himself had given a long leash in which he was allowed to bother Potter. In a way he had

condemned a 14-year-old boy to death because of his own petty grudges from his own childhood. For this reason alone, he worked until the potions had run out and then he could only pray that the boy would awaken.

Hermione Granger had overcome her shock and awoke the next morning to see Harry lying very still and pale but still breathing and fighting to come back to her. It was still a shock to Hermione but she was buoyed by the fact that Harry had survived the night.

Harry found himself in a strange world between life and death. Harry was greeted by the familiar voice he had heard in his head so frequently in the last few months. The voice kept calling him and saying, "Harry Potter, you must come to my voice because you still have much to live for."

Harry continued to float in the dark but he was aware the voice was growing louder and stronger. The minutes seemed to be hours and the hours seemed to be years as Harry drifted in the dark.

The school had initially been in shock about the incident and even Ron had visited Harry in the hospital wing. Hermione had been vigil at Harry's side as his condition had gradually improved. She only left to go to class, bathe, and eat. She was constantly sitting in her seat by Harry's bed, holding his hand as she read the homework assignments aloud to Harry and then did her essays as she squeezed his hand for reinforcement for herself as much as Harry. The students of Durmstrang and Beauxbatons were also united behind Harry as most of student populations of the schools visited and gave their well wishes.

Finally, one week after the incident Harry had found the voice and opened his eyes. He picked up a blur which Harry had become familiar enough to realize was Hermione. She appeared to be engrossed in her reading as she grasped Harry's hand tightly. Harry was content to grab his glasses carefully with his left hand to avoid disturbing Hermione in her element, and yet still able to watch her with his eyes focused properly.

Harry watched Hermione read her assignment aloud as she grasped his right hand. Harry decided that 10 minutes was long enough as he

squeezed her hand which she initially didn't register until he did it again and she glanced up at his face to see a pale but smiling Harry Potter watching her with an amused expression. Hermione jumped up on the bed and wrapped her arms around Harry's neck as she sobbed into his chest. Harry rubbed her back comfortingly before he glanced around the rest of the bed to see it littered with various cards and balloons.

"How long have I been out?" Harry quietly asked as he continued to comfort Hermione.

Hermione pulled her face from his chest and was smiling happily, as her red rimmed brown eyes were brighter than they had been since the day of the incident when she answered, "Oh Harry, you've been out for a week. I feel so terrible because I should have been able to stop him but I froze and I couldn't think of anything to do."

Harry gently placed his hand on Hermione's cheek before he said, "Hey I didn't do anything either and I watched Malfoy do it too. Don't blame yourself because it never should have happened. By the way, what has become of Malfoy?"

Hermione frowned and said, "Well, he's still at Hogwarts because his father pulled all of his strings in the ministry. But, he is on probation and is under threat of having his wand snapped if he steps out of line again this year. Snape actually punished him and told him that he'd never be a prefect or head boy. Incidentally, he was kicked out of potions for his little attempted murder. Consequently, we won't have to deal with him in there ever again ."

Harry nodded and softly said, "That's good, I didn't think Professor Snape had it in him to justly punish one of his Slytherins."

Harry was released from the hospital wing two days later and spent the balance of those two days frantically catching himself up in his classes. Harry had caught up in his classes by the time he returned to classes. Harry had no excuse to fall asleep in History of Magic his first day back as he had slept for nearly a week leading into it. No one brought up Malfoy's incident throughout the entire class but Harry could tell everyone was looking at him as though he was suddenly very fragile and prone to breaking.

Harry's next class was charms as he was able to show off his mastery of the summoning charm that he had learned for the first task. Harry was happy to be doing something constructive with his magic again after he had been cooped up for a week and a half sleeping and going stir crazy.

Harry and Hermione enjoyed a quiet lunch as they sat with Neville and Ginny and discussed the general happenings of the school. Gryffindor house had finally ceased the war with Ron at Harry's request and the redhead was locked into a conversation with Seamus and Lavender.

The final class of the day was the one that Hermione had been dreading the most as they had double potions with Snape and the other Slytherins. Harry had shown far less concern about the class especially after he heard about how Professor Snape had saved his life.

Harry and Hermione entered the class and Severus Snape looked somewhat pensive. The class opened and instead of Snape yelling at the class for being dunderheads and incompetent potion makers Snape merely said, "Mr. Potter I apologize that I was unable to provide a safe classroom for you our last meeting. I promise you it will never happen again."

Harry nodded respectfully to Snape before the potions master then addressed the entire class as he began his lecture, "Today we will be brewing the aging potion." And so the only time Harry had ever heard Snape apologize to anyone aside from Dumbledore had come and passed, and Harry found the experience to be far less satisfying than he had imagined it would be.

Harry received a letter from Sirius the following day.

Harry,

I've heard all about what the ferret did to you in potions. I thought Hermione was going to go spare with worry because she was sending a letter every other day while you were out. Anyways remember today is the day where you need to follow the signs and

you'll find me. Hermione tells me you've gotten me some presents. I look forward to seeing you and receiving them.

Sirius

Harry and Hermione caught one of the first carriages into the village as they looked for the sign that Sirius spoke off. Fortunately they didn't have to look long as the sign coming in to the village was pointed off in the direction of the shrieking shack.

Eventually the carriage stopped at the edge of the town and Harry and Hermione got out of the carriage. They immediately spotted the big black dog at the edge of the forest and followed it out into the forest. The large black dog affectionately known as Snuffles led them to a cave, which also happened to have Buckbeak the Hippogriff in it.

Snuffle transformed back to Sirius and was engulfed into a bug hug by both Harry and Hermione. Sirius smiled as he said, "Hey pup, Hermione how are you guys doing today?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "We are doing better now Sirius, how are you?"

Sirius smiled and replied, "I am doing better now that I have two of my favorite people in the world here."

Harry smiled and said, "Sirius we brought you some food made by Dobby and Winky. We figured you might like to have some good food because I can't imagine you are eating too well out here."

Sirius shook his head and said, "No I can't say that I have. Hey how are you guys dealing with that Rita Skeeter?"

Hermione smiled evilly and said, "I had Winky do some bug catching after the last article came out. I realized there was only one way she could keep getting the information she was and after the second task a pesky water beetle was buzzing us. It didn't take a genius to realize that February is usually a little cold for water beetles to be around. Suffice it to say, I have our least favorite reporter under lid with some holes punched in it."

Sirius smiled and bowed theatrically as he said, "You honor the marauders with your mischief." He straightened up as Hermione giggled and he added thoughtfully, "Perhaps you and Harry would be interested in becoming members this summer. I'll have to talk with Moony about arranging something."

Harry and Hermione then gave Sirius their Christmas presents as they sat and chatted about the year. Sirius laughed when Harry told him about Snape's apology, and he grew angry when Hermione discussed Malfoy's punishment. He was saddened, much as Harry and Hermione were, when they described what Ron had done to the pair over the course of the year.

Sirius made a point to say after they had finished their story, "I just want both of you to know that you make a great team. I must admit that is the truth, with or without Ron, as evidenced by my freedom now. As long as you stick together I have no doubts you can do anything you put your minds to."

Harry reached out and grasped Hermione's hand as she looked back at him warmly and said, "You're right Sirius as long as we stick together we can do anything."

They chatted for another hour or so, content to make sure to keep Sirius company as long as they possibly could. Unfortunately, the moments of companionship came to an end when they had to return to the carriages and the castle. They shared one last group hug before Harry and Hermione walked back to the carriages feeling content that they had spent their time well for the day.

March went by quickly and soon it was to be time for the third task. Harry and Hermione continued to work together as Hermione tutored Harry in Runes and Arithmancy as Harry continued to work with Hermione on her patronus.

Hermione was finally able to cast a corporeal patronus the second week of April as she had a beautiful doe come bounding out of her wand. Hermione used the memory of Harry asking her to the Ball as her memory and her doe was very beautiful as Hermione watched it prance.

Harry's stag soon joined the doe as the patroni galloped around the common room late one night and the sight filled Harry and Hermione with warmth. The doe nuzzled into the stag's neck and soon they dissipated. Harry and Hermione could only describe the sight as the most magical they had experienced in their lives.

Learning the patronus charm was primarily for protection from dementor attacks but, it also gave Hermione a lot of confidence knowing she had successfully completed a seventh year charm that even most adult wizards could not do, because of the extensive mental discipline required to do it.

Hermione quickly realized how skilled of a teacher Harry could be, because she never once felt discouraged during the process of learning the charm. During Harry's teaching sessions she had also learned several lesser but useful hexes from him while she slowly made progress on the patronus. Hermione's marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts had improved from an E to an O, thanks to Harry's help, as she was typically the second fastest student in the class to master the practical portion of the course behind him thanks to his tutoring.

Harry had discussed with Dumbledore the necessity to go against a skilled Legilimens in order to test the strength of his shield and his progress. Albus attempted to break into Harry's mind as soon as he walked into the office but was rebuffed by Harry's primary shield.

Albus was decidedly rather impressed by Harry's display, but the second time he was able to bypass the primary shield and attempted to bring up any memory that Harry wished to hide. Harry's secondary shields weren't nearly as strong but Harry did an admirable job of ejecting the headmaster from his mind after he had snooped around for a while.

Albus proudly told Harry that he would undertake the remainder of Harry's training in Occlumency and Legilimency and with any luck he could have a firm grasp of the arts by the end of the year. All things considered, life at Hogwarts was looking up.

A/N: **Please Review.** Tell me how you think I am handling the story so far. I'd like to see some more reviews, but that's more of a request

than a demand. I hope you are all enjoying the story so far in it's slightly altered condition and keep reading!

Chapter 7

The week leading up to the third task led to a series of unsettling events. First, there was a rash of isolated attacks of muggles at the beginning of the week. This alone wouldn't have been so strange except for the casting of the dark mark at each residence.

The minister continued to deny the possibility of Voldemort's return despite Dumbledore's constant counsel to the contrary. The prophet once again began to publish articles pushed by the minister indicating that Voldemort was truly dead and anyone who said otherwise was merely trying to stir up some trouble.

Unfortunately by Wednesday two high-ranking ministry officials who were personally involved in the tournament had come up missing. Bertha Jorkins who Harry had realized had been missing since before the Quiditch world cup.

Also, Barty Crouch Sr. the primary organizer for the event, went missing while on Hogwarts grounds on the days leading up to the third task and was found murdered merely 10 feet into the forbidden forest beyond Hagrid's hut. Dumbledore had kept the details of the murder quiet, and instead of bringing in more ministry officials to help with the third task, he had appointed Moody to make the final arrangements for the task in an attempt to avoid any potential betrayals.

Meanwhile, Harry and Dumbledore had been working on his Occlumency training and introducing him to Legilimency. Harry's Occlumency training was making leaps and bounds in effectiveness thanks to his constant exposure to an accomplished Legilimens such as Dumbledore. Even Dumbledore was quite sure that Harry would not suffer any further visions without great risk to Voldemort himself.

Dumbledore had also been taking the time during their training sessions to show Harry memories of the first rise of Voldemort, and the trials of many of his death eaters after his fall. Dumbledore wanted to impress upon Harry the attitudes of people in a time of war because he was certain similar times were coming soon.

Harry watched the trial of Igor Karkaroff as the current Headmaster of Durmstrang pleaded with Barty Crouch Sr. by giving him names of all the other deatheaters he knew in exchange for a reprieve from Azkaban. Karkaroff named several deatheaters including Professor Snape who Dumbledore stood in support of stating that he was no more a deatheater than Dumbledore himself and therefore had been freed of all charges.

Eventually, Karkaroff named his last deatheater as he told the entire Wizengamot that Barty Crouch Jr. was amongst Voldemort's inner circle. Of course as son of the head of the MLE Crouch Sr. was stunned as his son attempted to make an escape that was cut short as Moody stunned him in the middle of the courtroom. Barty Crouch Jr. spat in his father's face and wildly exclaimed, "Voldemort lives and you all shall pay."

Dumbledore pulled them out of the memory as Harry stood agape, before he asked, "So even back then they knew that Voldemort wasn't dead. Why didn't anyone do anything about it?"

Dumbledore sat Harry down and then took his seat behind the desk as he simply said, "Barty Crouch Sr. wouldn't allow us to incite mass hysteria by making such an announcement and I was unable to track down Voldemort in the time I could spare. I am afraid now I have made a grievous error because it appears Voldemort is prepared to make his return very soon. Harry I want you to know that I will do everything within my power to keep you and all of the students at Hogwarts safely detached from this war on the horizon for as long as possible. I fear that you being known as the only one ever to have defeated him, you will be too large target for Tom and his supporters to pass up so you will be well protected this summer. For now I suggest you get some sleep and prepare for the final task my boy."

Harry had been informing Hermione of each of his private sessions with Dumbledore while Hermione took copious notes of the pensieve trips so that she would not miss anything important that might become important for later inspection. Hermione had been reviewing some charms and hexes that they had earlier in the year so that Harry would have a full complement of spells at his disposal for the

final task which had only been described as the ultimate measure of a wizard or witch's ability.

Harry had also been using every spare minute of his time getting Hermione up into the air on his Firebolt. Initially, Harry had Hermione just riding to get used to the feel of being on a broom and soaring in the sky high above the ground. The next phase in making the talented Ms. Granger a flyer had Hermione flying and steering the broom as Harry sat behind her, always giving her words of instruction and encouragement. Finally, Harry had Hermione fly the broom all by herself a few feet above the ground, which after some gentle encouragement and coaching she was able to do competently. Hermione was terribly proud of overcoming her fear of heights; while Harry was happy he could help her do one of the few magical things that she had never picked up.

The Friday before the final task Harry basically sleepwalked through his classes despite the fact that he wasn't tired in the least. Harry almost felt as though he was outside of his own body for the entire day. Harry could hear the constant presence of the familiar voice inside his head repeatedly say, "Let me take your burden for the day. You need to get yourself some rest because tomorrow will be a long day."

Hermione watched as Harry and yet not Harry made his way through his classes for the day and only spoke when spoken too. Harry's usually emerald green eyes were slightly glossy as though Harry was merely on autopilot for the day.

Finally, the morning of the final task had come. Harry awoke at 7 am and honestly felt quite energetic and rested and was glad he had done whatever he had the previous day. Strangely, Harry had no memory of what he had done on Friday but was glad that he had done it.

Harry met Hermione down in the common room and she was much more clingy than normal as she clung to his arm tightly as they made their way down to the great hall. Harry was surprised to see the entire Weasley family minus Ron awaiting his presence along with a big black dog Harry knew to be Sirius. Harry immediately felt more

relaxed then he had been as they all sat at a round table in the great hall and talked about school for the year as they effortlessly skirted the issue of Ron.

Snuffles made a point to stay close to Harry throughout the meal and even Hermione snuck the old dog some bacon, which Snuffles ate, gratefully before licking Hermione's face. Dumbledore watched the entire exchange as he smiled and his eyes were twinkling. The other 3 champions each had similar groups at their tables as Harry made a point to wave at Cedric and his father who both returned the wave happily.

Viktor sat at his table with the man from the second task and a regal looking woman who Harry figured must be his mother. Harry gave a respectful nod to Viktor who returned the gesture with a smile.

Harry finally glanced at Fleur's table as she was talking animatedly with a beautiful woman who must have been Fleur's mother. Harry glanced around the great hall and saw the vast majority of the male population of the three schools staring at the Delacoeur table. Harry then checked his own table and found that all of the Weasley males aside from Arthur and Bill appeared to be in the same situation. Harry smiled at Hermione who made an appreciative smile of her own as she squeezed Harry's hand in a way to say that she had been seeing the same thing in the great hall. It was clear to Hermione that Harry wasn't affected like the majority of the other males in the room, and secretly she hoped that she was the reason for it.

The meal ended in the great hall and Dumbledore stood and gathered the attention of the students and their guests. Dumbledore said, "Today we will be having the final task of the tri-wizard tournament. This year we have held the tournament in the hopes that new friendships could begin amongst the various students of the three primary magical schools in Europe. It is my belief that it has been an overwhelming success, and in the near future I believe we must stand strong with our friends to come through the dark and back into the light. I hope we have a safe and enjoyable final task today; now please join in with me as we give the champions a hand."

The entire great hall erupted into applause as each champion stood and took a bow. Harry received the largest applause when he took his bow and sat down face flushed with embarrassment. Hermione gave him a peck on the cheek and said, "Harry don't be embarrassed those people aren't cheering for the boy-who-lived. They are cheering for you. They are cheering for the leader of the tri-wizard tournament who also happens to be a fourth year Gryffindor, and the most powerful student in the school. Take it as a compliment and feel flattered Harry, you've earned it."

Harry sighed and nodded before he spoke so quietly that only Sirius and Hermione could hear him as he said, "I just don't like living my life having to analyze every action someone else takes. I know how people try to get to know me because I'm the boy-who-lived but that doesn't mean I like it. It's hard when you never know if people are being genuine with you or are just looking to ride your coat tails that you never wanted in the 1st place."

Hermione sighed and wrapped Harry into a big hug. Sirius was licking Harry's hand that he had sagging at his sides before Hermione said, "Harry, I'll probably never know what it feels like to be you. Something tells me I probably never would want to if given the opportunity but if anyone can carry thus burden it's you. But, I can tell you that I will help you when you need me and I will always only be interested in Harry Potter and not the boy-who-lived."

To everyone else in the great hall it simply appeared that Harry Potter was getting a hug from his girlfriend as he prepared for the final task of the tri-wizard tournament. But, to Harry the hug and the words that accompanied them served as the soothing balm on Harry's sometimes tortured soul that he had desperately longed to hear since he had first learned about his reluctant fame. Someone did care for just him, and even though he knew that was the case for more than just her. However, it still did wonders for him hearing her say it.

Breakfast ended and Harry felt extremely well rested and somehow he felt lighter as another burden that he had willingly taken on had been lifted a great deal. Harry knew then that he would help Hermione shoulder her burdens as well. Now he just needed to know what burdens she carried around. Harry figured being a muggleborn

carried its share of baggage in the wizarding world, as did the fact that she was constantly described as a know-it-all and bookish. There were also those that called her plain looking but Harry knew that in their short time together even Hermione didn't believe that any more. Harry made a mental note to begin drawing up plans to help Hermione as she had so wonderfully helped him in their short time together as a couple.

The next thing Harry was aware of he was standing in the middle of the stadium awaiting the final task. Harry glanced back and he saw each champion had one person seeing him or her off. Hermione stood behind Harry as the anxiety that was plainly there in concerns for his safety rolled off of her. Harry did the only thing he could as he walked up to her kissed her sweetly on the lips, caressed her cheek and wrapped her into a tight hug as he repeated three words over and over into her ear, "I love you."

Harry broke the hug as he noticed several people were watching them in fascination before he smiled at Hermione who returned the smile before he heard Ludo Bagman say, "Champions, the final task will be a great maze. Within the maze are several challenges that will arrive upon you without warning and without prejudice. The maze is a puzzling place because the very nature of all but the most pure at heart will change while within it. At the center of the maze the tri-wizard cup awaits the tri-wizard champion. The leader Mr. Potter will be staggered along with the other champions as one-point equals a 5-second difference at the start. We will be patrolling at the edge of the maze. If any of you have problems send red sparks above your position and we will come and get you wherein your tournament will be finished. At the sound of the gun Mr. Potter may proceed."

Harry looked once more at Hermione and mouthed "I love you." Hermione smiled and audibly said, "I love you too Harry. Now come back to me." Harry smiled and at the sound of the gun Harry drew his wand and walked into the maze that closed behind him as he entered.

Harry immediately cast lumos and began to jog his way forward in the dark maze. Harry heard a whistle indicating that Cedric had entered the maze just as he reached the first fork in his road as he went left. Harry could faintly hear the crowd murmur and Harry figured they

somehow were watching each of the champions as they made progress. Harry next heard second and quickly behind it third whistle blow indicating that all of the champions were now in the maze.

Harry looked around and cast Hermione's custom-made compass spell as he said *point me*, and his wand pointed to the right. Harry was moving more slowly as he waited for the first challenge in the maze. Just as Harry came into a small clearing in the maze he spotted Cedric who appeared to be engaged in a serious battle against a pair of Blast-Ended Skrewts. Harry rushed to help and Cedric with Harry's help was able to avoid any more damage than the mild burns he had suffered when he first encountered them.

Cedric glanced at Harry as they moved to a fork in the path and he said, "Thanks for the help Harry. This is where we split up again eh?"

Harry nodded as he had cast *point me* again and went to the left as Cedric went to the right. Harry went down a long corridor and finally came upon a point when he felt a sudden chill and looked up to see the menacing visage of a dementor swooping down towards him. Harry immediately began working over in his mind why such a dark creature would be in the maze before it dawned on him and he said riddikulus as the boggart immediately turned into a muggle cartoon character he had seen in his time with the Dursleys. Casper floated past Harry as the friendly ghost smiled at Harry as he chuckled and continued down the path. Harry looked up and spotted red sparks coming from a distance back so Harry assumed either Fleur or Krum had been eliminated.

Harry then reached an intriguing golden mist blocking the path. Harry cast a variety of spells on the mist hoping that it would dissipate. Finally, growing restless he walked into the mist and immediately the entire world was turned upside down. Harry's head was making contact with the ground just as his feet had been earlier. Harry began to panic and instinctively his feet made to run as Harry started moving through the mist. Harry then realized the mist must have created an illusion of some sort so he ran to the end of the mist and soon realized he was still on his feet and he had cleared another challenge. Harry heard a faint shout in the near distance and he began to run towards the sound.

Finally, Harry heard a voice scream "What the hell are you doing Krum?"

Harry then heard Krum scream *Crucio*. Harry ran towards the voices and screamed *expelliarmus* as Krum was sent flying and his wand left his company. Cedric got up shakily and looked at Harry with trepidation before he turned his attention to Krum and raised his wand before Harry softly said, "Did you notice the look in his eyes Cedric?"

Cedric turned and looked at Harry incredulously before he said, "What are you on about Harry?"

Harry sighed and said, "Someone had him under the imperius curse Cedric. It wasn't him doing that to you. Let's just send some red sparks up with his wand and move on ok?"

Cedric nodded hesitantly and sent the red sparks up as they heard the crowd in the far distance moan collectively. Cedric then said, "Well thanks for the help again Harry. Hopefully next time I can help you."

Harry smiled as this time Harry went to the right and Cedric went to the left. Harry continued to walk as he slowly picked up the pace of his steps hoping the maze was nearing its end. Suddenly, Harry came around a corner and spotted a creature Harry knew well from Hagrid's COMC class. There stood a sphinx and Harry did the only thing that came to mind as he asked, "Would you move please?"

The sphinx looked at Harry quizzically before it simply said, "I must give you a riddle. If you get it correct you shall pass freely, if you are incorrect I shall attack you, if you choose not to answer after I ask the riddle you may turn around and escape unscathed."

Harry nodded as weighed the choices realizing he had nothing to lose by hearing the riddle so he quietly said, "May I hear the riddle please?"

The sphinx sat back on its hind haunches before it said,

What walks on 4, then 2, then 3 before it dies?

Harry knew that he had heard a similar riddle before in the past. Truthfully, he knew Hermione would already be past the sphinx but pushed those thoughts away and began to work over the clues in his head. Harry began to think of creatures that walked on all fours. Then he wondered which of those could also walk on two feet. Harry thought long and hard before he came up with a bear and man. Harry figured there were more animals that were likely to fill the criteria but he couldn't afford to waste any more time than he already had. Harry then went over the last clue of walking on 3 before he thought of how a bear couldn't possibly walk on 3 so he softly said, "Is it Man?"

The sphinx smiled and shifted to the side as Harry ran past with a smile on his face. He ran into the next corridor and after he cast point me once more. Harry came around another corner and he could see the glowing presence of the tri-wizard cup at the end of his corridor. It was then that he spotted Cedric in a perpendicular corridor as he blissfully ran towards the cup. Harry then spotted the looming presence of a giant spider as it appeared primed to pounce on Cedric or at the very least maim him.

Harry screamed, "Cedric watch out."

Cedric glanced around before he dived out of the way of the Acromantula as its fangs glistened with its venom. Harry watched, as the spider was primed to sink its fangs into Cedric, before he unleashed a barrage of spells that did nothing more than to avert the Acromantula's attention towards him instead of Cedric.

Harry muttered under his breath, "Bloody hell why do I always have to save people."

It was then that the Acromantula lunged at Harry and kicked him into the air with 2 of its legs before it caught him with its pincers. Harry could only look into the numerous dark eyes of the beast and watch as one of its fangs plunged into his leg. Harry let out an inarticulate scream before he blocked the throbbing in his leg and cast *stupefy* on the great beast right in the center of its eyes causing it to keel over and drop him painfully to the ground.

Harry watched as Cedric made the last few tentative steps to the cup and appeared ready to grab the cup and win the competition before

he glanced back at Harry who was still in agony as the venom rushed through his body. Cedric looked at Harry and ran towards the young Gryffindor as he cast a healing spell before he said, "There that should stop the bleeding and slow the venom down quite a bit. Now give me your hand so we can get the proper champion to the cup."

Harry still feeling woozy said, "No Cedric you beat me to the cup, it's yours."

Cedric shook his head and said, "Nonsense Harry you've bailed me out twice already in this task. You are the rightful champion."

Harry too tired and sore to argue was led to the cup as he favored his left leg considerably and put the rest of his weight on Cedric. They finally reached the cup and the voice in Harry's head forcibly said, "It must come to pass Harry. Ask him to share the win."

Harry quietly suggested, "Cedric, why don't we both grab the cup at the same time. That way it can be a double victory for Hogwarts."

Cedric looked tentatively at Harry before he said, "Y-You mean it Harry."

Harry cracked a painful smile before he said, "Yeah Cedric so let's do it on the count of 3."

As Harry and Cedric grabbed the cup at the same time Harry felt the familiar tug at his navel like he had at the world cup before they were pulled into a vortex of swirling color and deposited in a familiar graveyard.

Harry landed painfully and as he braced himself to stand he caught a glimpse of the graveyard and said, "Cedric get back to the portkey, and get some help. I have a bad feeling about this."

A/N: Please Review. I know it is very similar to cannon but I couldn't really think of possibly doing it better than JKR, so I just made a couple of small alterations. Keep reading and reviewing and once again thanks.

Chapter 8

As Harry finally made it to his feet, he glanced at Cedric and pleaded, "Cedric get back to the portkey, and you need to tell Professor Dumbledore Riddle and Graveyard. He'll know where I am. Hurry Cedric please."

Cedric nodded and said, "Ok Harry, but take care of yourself ok?"

Harry nodded as Cedric turned to run towards the cup before they each heard a shrill horrid voice scream, "Do not let the spare get away so that he may warn others, stop him."

Harry then watched as Cedric got to the cup and just as he reached it he heard a shaky whiny voice utter reducto. Harry watched in Horror as Cedric grabbed the cup and was stricken in the chest by the curse simultaneously.

Harry then proceeded to throw a variety of curses at Wormtail as he carried a small bundle that Harry could only guess was Voldemort. Wormtail blocked most of them but Harry was able to hit him with a blinding curse just as he was hit by a stunner and lost consciousness.

Cedric landed right back at the entrance of the maze much to the horror of everyone involved he was bleeding profusely as he clutched to the cup. Amos Diggory and Dumbledore frantically ran up to the boy as Cedric weakly said, "Harry told me to tell you Riddle and Graveyard. He said you'd know where that was." Dumbledore nodded vaguely as Hermione had begun to scream as she began to comprehend and was consoled by Molly Weasley as the crowd had gone silent.

Madam Pomfrey went over to Cedric who was reassuring his father more than the other way around. She went up to Cedric and ran a quick diagnostic before she realized it was too late to save Cedric. She then said something she would never forget when she said softly and quietly, "Mr. Diggory, Cedric doesn't have long, make sure you and your wife say your final goodbyes along with Ms. Chang." Cedric's eyes glistened, but he nodded respectfully as he hugged his

parents and Cho loosely and they said their final farewells before Cedric bled to death on the Quidditch pitch.

Dumbledore meanwhile had detached himself as much as he could from Cedric's situation and quickly made a portkey to the site that he remembered Riddle Manor and the graveyard to be located. He quietly told Snape of his plans and to keep an attentive eye out for the spy that had turned the cup into a portkey.

Meanwhile back at the graveyard Wormtail with Voldemort's assistance had bound Harry to a headstone just as Harry had regained consciousness. Harry frantically looked around for his wand but Voldemort merely said, "Harry my child, your wand is in my possession until I may be in the proper state to duel you. So sit still and watch my rebirth."

Harry squirmed wildly trying to free himself from his bounds but was helpless to watch as Wormtail placed the bundle that was Voldemort into a cauldron that had been placed in the middle of a clearing next to the headstone where Harry was bound. Wormtail began the ritual as he said, "Bone of the father unknowingly given, you will renew your son." Wormtail blindly grasped for a bone and threw it into the cauldron as it hissed and then stopped.

Now Wormtail's typically pale complexion had grown paler as he whimpered, "Flesh of the servant willingly given you will revive your master."

Wormtail pulled out a long silver dagger as Harry watched the former Marauder willingly cut his own hand off as it dropped into the cauldron. Suddenly the fire beneath the cauldron flared as the cauldron hissed much more strongly this time.

Finally Wormtail turned towards Harry as he almost gleefully said, "Blood of the enemy forcibly taken you will revive your foe." Wormtail slashed at Harry's left forearm as the already pale and weak Harry screamed out in pain once again. Wormtail carefully took some of the blood on the dagger and let it drip into the cauldron, which flashed brightly causing Harry to snap back to attention despite the pain screaming through his body.

Harry watched in disbelief as he watched the cauldron tip and a fully-grown tall and pale man stand before Harry and Wormtail. The middle-aged man had dark hair with streaks of gray running through it. He had a face that had curved in all of the places to indicate how malicious he truly was. What made the man truly evil in appearance was the glowing red eyes that had suddenly flashed in anger towards Harry and Wormtail in almost a painfully obvious way. Harry's scar flashed in pain and he lost consciousness.

Finally, Voldemort hissed, "Ah Wormtail, my faithful and weak servant. Give me your arm and my wand."

Wormtail bowed and handed the dark wizard his arm from his amputated hand as he said, "Thank you master, you are too kind."

Voldemort hissed and struck Wormtail with the back of his hand and said, "Idiot, I wish to have your left arm."

Wormtail could only whimper in confusion as he offered his left arm, "M-Master?"

Voldemort roughly grasped Wormtail's left forearm and lowered his sleeve to show off the dark mark in all of its apparent glory. Voldemort roughly pressed his wand onto the mark and said, "Death Eaters come to me now."

Suddenly a cyclone appeared next to Voldemort as several wizards wearing their death eater disguises landed around him in a circle of obedience. Voldemort hissed and asked, "Why have my most loyal followers not bothered to revive me in the last 13 years?"

Suddenly one of the death eaters stepped forward and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes as he said, "Forgive me master."

Voldemort merely helped the death eater to his feet and said, "Now, now Lucius I have wasted far too long without a body to needlessly punish my most faithful follower."

Voldemort then went around the circle making comments about each of the death eaters in turn saying names such as, "Avery, Macnair, Crabbe, Nott, and Goyle" as he passed over a few others that any

outside observer would assume to be less important followers. He then said, "Many of my most faithful reside in Azkaban. I will ensure they will be rewarded for their loyalty in going there instead of renouncing me as many here did. For now Wormtail come here so I may reward you properly."

Wormtail stepped forward and said, "Thank you master, you are most kind."

Voldemort sneered and said, "I am not kind but I do award those that are faithful and competent." He placed his wand above Wormtail's stump where his hand had resided, and wordlessly conjured a great silver hand where his other formerly resided.

Voldemort then walked over towards Harry cast enervate on Harry and released his bounds before he tossed Harry's wand at his feet and said, "Now foolish boy, you will die tonight, but not before you learn to rue the day you crossed paths with Lord Voldemort."

Harry slowly grabbed his wand with his good and more importantly wand arm before Voldemort coolly said crucio, causing Harry to writhe on the ground as his vision began to gray out and he prepared to lose consciousness once again. Voldemort laughed mirthfully before he said, "My faithful followers I stand here before you today to tell you the story of how a mere child could have defeated me. I was foolish as I killed his mother after she had used old magic on her child as a means for protection. I cast the killing curse on the child and it rebounded upon me destroying my body. This child then defeated me 3 years ago because he still retained his mother's protection again and I was forced to flee again while I waited for my opportunity. Today I stand before you however, with my body returned and the foolish girl's protections gone. Behold my brilliance."

Voldemort roughly picked up Harry who was still shaking from the curse as he placed his hands around Harry's throat and grasped roughly cutting the air off to Harry's lungs. He dropped Harry to the ground as Harry struggled back to his feet as Voldemort and his followers cackled like Hyena's.

Voldemort then looked at Harry who was holding his wand tightly and said, "Now Harry, we shall duel to your death. First we bow and then we duel."

Harry's knees were forced to bend by a deatheater before Voldemort raised his wand and uttered Avada Kedavra. The voice in Harry's head screamed at him and Harry returned with Expelliarmus. Next however, something truly amazing occurred. The two spells collided in the air and connected leaving Harry and Voldemort tightly grasping their wands as the two spells had merged to form a great golden stream connecting the two wands. Harry and Voldemort gripped their wands tightly to prevent them from flying from their grasps. They all watched as a golden cage formed around Harry and Voldemort preventing any of his deatheaters from disarming Harry forcibly. They were all the more amazed when shadows of all of the people that Voldemort had killed with his wand began to exit his wand as Harry had forced the beads of the golden light into Voldemort's wand. Harry watched as Bertha Jorkins, Frank the Riddle family caretaker, and finally Harry's parents exited the wand.

The shadow of Lily and James Potter spoke to Harry as they said, "Son, you have to let go. We can hold him off for a second so you can run. Dumbledore is near and he can take you away from here."

Harry relinquished the spell as the shadows engulfed Voldemort. Harry ran behind a mausoleum and spotted Dumbledore in the distance. By this time the deatheaters had fanned out in the graveyard searching for Harry. As Dumbledore spotted Harry, he watched as Harry dodged a spell from a now seeing Wormtail before he stunned the betrayer. Albus Dumbledore was shocked as he saw the state Harry was in. Harry was pale and looked like he had a deep cut on his left leg and arm. More telling to Dumbledore however, were the tears streaming down his face as he bound Wormtail. Harry instantly became numb as his adrenaline had begun to wear and he waited for Dumbledore to come, and to take him away from the living nightmare he currently resided in.

Dumbledore grasped his shoulder gently before he said, "Harry, we can take him back and you can clear Sirius. Do you want Sirius to adopt you?"

Harry could only shake his head as the tears fell freely from his face. Dumbledore manufactured the same portkey he had used earlier as they both grasped the bound Wormtail and felt the familiar pull at the navel form of travel known as a portkey.

The situation at Hogwarts has slowly dissolved into one just shy of mass hysteria as it had been nearly a half an hour since Cedric had returned and died with still no word on Harry's condition. Snape had kept the tenuous calm of the crowd by dispatching the staff members to keep the students calm. His forearm burned terribly as he once again cursed the life he had chosen as a spy with no set side aside from his own. Snape knew by the pain he felt in his arm that his one time master had returned and Snape shuddered when he imagined the pain he would feel for not arriving when he was originally summoned.

Hermione was still sobbing into Molly Weasley's shoulder when the telltale blur of Portkey travel was spotted in the same spot Dumbledore had vanished from. What shocked everyone present however was additional passenger had come along and to the knowledgeable the recognized the man was long thought to have been murdered by Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew. What was even more shocking was the mere slip of a boy that remained in place of the co tri-wizard champion Harry Potter. Dumbledore immediately moved Harry away from Wormtail as he was joined by two ministry aurors who were stationed at the school for the final task. Cornelius Fudge came forward and screamed, "Dumbledore, who is this man and why is he here?"

Dumbledore's typically twinkling eyes held no such sparkle as he said, "Minister this is Peter Pettigrew and he will help clear Sirius Black of the crimes he was wrongfully convicted for 13 years ago. I will take him into my custody until such a time as a proper trial may be held for the man and a pardon for Sirius Black may be issued." Dumbledore and the aurors began transporting Pettigrew back to the castle leaving Harry to stand-alone, numbly coming to grasp with the events of the night.

Dumbledore turned to Harry and softly said, "Harry, do not go anywhere; I will return for you, and then you may be properly tended to."

Harry merely sat down as his eyes belied the fact that he had seen many terrible things. Harry wasn't aware that Hermione had grasped him into a tight hug as they both sat in the blood of Cedric where he had died mere minutes before. Hermione desperately tried to get Harry to respond but his normally bright green eyes were dull and listless and slightly glossed over.

Eventually Moody came up to the young couple and gruffly said, "Ms. Granger, Professor Dumbledore has requested that Mr. Potter return with me to the castle."

Moody disentangled Hermione's arms from Harry before Harry spoke quietly, "I am not supposed to leave until the headmaster returns."

Moody clearly annoyed said, "That's why I told you he told me to come and bring you to him. Now let's hurry so we can get your injuries tended to."

At this point Harry's entire left leg was numb from the Acromantula venom and his arm still ached from the slashes he had received in it. Nonetheless Harry found a strength he wasn't aware he had when he said, "No, I won't leave until the headmaster returns for me."

Moody then grabbed his sides in pain before he raised his wand and feebly fired a stunner at Harry and Hermione. Hermione caught unaware slumped to the ground but Harry still running on the adrenalin from earlier in the night threw up protego and deflected the stunner back at the surprised former master auror. Harry bound his defense professor, sure that his actions would result in his expulsion, but he really didn't care because the headmaster had insisted he stay until he returned. Harry grabbed Moody's wand and revived Hermione who looked panicked when she saw Harry standing over Moody's body which was now bound.

Hermione shrieked, "What have you done Harry?"

Harry still very pale managed to shrug and say, "I deflected his stunner and then bound him. Do you really think that if he was the real Professor Moody, he would have fired a stunner at us?"

Hermione's face dawned comprehension before she said, "Oh, of course Harry. I'm sorry I doubted you."

They sat and watched transfixed as Moody's face began to contort and change into a face that Harry knew only too well, Barty Crouch Jr. a deatheater. Harry stunned the man again and they waited until Dumbledore returned appearing quite concerned with Professor McGonagall in tow. Then the sight appeared as Harry and Hermione stood hand in hand over a man who had been bound. Dumbledore was even more amazed when he saw the man was Barty Crouch Jr. who was long thought to have been dead and even more troublesome was Moody's magical eye and stump alongside him.

Dumbledore grasped Harry's shoulders gently as he said, "Harry what happened here?"

Harry turned around as the emotions of the night finally caught up to him as he choked out, "Professor Moody was polyjuiced and he tried to take me. I told him no and he stunned Hermione but I deflected it and stunned him instead. You told me to wait here, and I did sir." Then Harry began to cry. Hermione grasped him tightly and hugged him as she murmured soothing sounds into his ear that didn't seem to stem the tide.

Dumbledore appeared as though all of the air had been knocked out of him as he made a portkey for his own office. He grasped Crouch's body as they all traveled via portkey back to the castle. Dumbledore's thoughts began to swirl at how much danger Harry's life had been placed in, simply because he had been unable to convince Barty Crouch Sr. that Harry would never place his name in the goblet. Now, as they landed in his office via the Portkey Dumbledore watched the 14 year-old-boy who he had subconsciously become very fond of, begin to sob freely in the arms of his girlfriend. Dumbledore, showing strength a man of over 150 years old shouldn't have, picked Harry up with little or no effort as he spirited him away towards the hospital wing. Hermione and Professor McGonagall followed closely behind

as they levitated Crouch Jr.; both women were now openly weeping for Harry and the terrors he witnessed that night.

Dumbledore rushed into the hospital wing and immediately Fawkes arrived with a flash of fire and began to cry into Harry's leg wound while he also trilled a beautiful song that calmed everyone in the room even though it was apparent that it was only meant for Harry. Fawkes had always held Harry in a special place in his heart and his melody was beautifully melancholic which calmed Harry down from hysteria to quiet terror.

Finally Madam Pomfrey had treated Harry to her contentment, and Harry was surrounded on every side by Snuffles, Hermione, Professor McGonagall, Dumbledore, and every Weasley that could squeeze in around him in the small corner of the hospital wing. Harry's eyes were still glossy and unfocused as his glasses had been placed aside during the initial check up performed by Madam Pomfrey allowing everyone to truly see the aftermath of the day's tragic events.

Madam Pomfrey let out a sigh of relief that she wasn't going to lose two of her favorite students, and her only worries that were remaining for Harry were more psychological than physical at this juncture. She made a mental note to contact a mind healer at St. Mungo's to find the proper way of dealing with Harry to a full and speedy recovery from his ordeal. As she walked away from Harry's bed, everyone else watched in utter agony and soul rending sadness as the normally strong and brave young man Harry was becoming had completely shut down as he stared out into the unseeing darkness of his memories from the night.

Finally, Harry quietly spoke, "Cedric and I landed in a graveyard after we touched the cup. I told Cedric to get to the cup and tell the headmaster where I was. I saw him get hit by a curse as he vanished. He's dead isn't he?"

Harry looked around and saw confirmation in Dumbledore's eyes. Harry then surprised them all because he reacted as though he had already assumed the fact and he said, "Voldemort, he's back. He used a ritual with the bone of his father, the flesh of his servant, and

the blood of me forcibly taken. H-he used to crucio curse on me and then we dueled. Our wands locked up and shadows of the people he had killed with his wand came out. I saw my parents and they told me to release the spell because they would help me. I escaped and stunned Wormtail and bound him. The headmaster came for me like I knew he would and we portkeyed back to Hogwarts. I-I stayed because the headmaster told me to. Hermione sat with me and then Moody came and tried to get me to come with him. I told him the headmaster told me not to leave and he tried to the both of us. He got Hermione, but I reflected the curse and he was stunned instead. I bound him and then the headmaster came for me again just like he said he would.”

Harry began to tremble slightly before he finally ground out between chattering teeth, “I’m getting tired now.” Harry said the last part as his voice began to tremble in time with his body. Hermione grasped his hand tightly and Snuffles hopped up on the bed and licked Harry’s tears away, as the mere shell of the young man who had woke up that morning, slowly settled to sleep with the aid of a dreamless sleeping draught.

A/N: Please Review. Phew... those last two chapters were hard to write, while still keeping canon somewhat in mind. Tell me what you think of how I did with this chapter. I am rather proud of it but I’d like to know your opinion too.

To clear up any confusion as to the premise I have set forth in the story, fate is acting as a persuasive voice to help Harry effect some very positive changes in his life. The voice will appear intermittently throughout the story helping Harry to take charge in his life and save some of those he couldn’t last time. Harry has no idea he came from the future so he doesn’t address his problems with any knowledge of the future.

Chapter 9

As soon as Harry fell into a well deserved night of rest following his ordeal in which he dueled with Voldemort and survived and also bested two death eaters and captured them himself. Hermione had climbed into bed with Harry after she had written a letter to her parents about what Harry had went through as she used a very sorrowful Hedwig who almost appeared to understand Hermione's request without even hearing it. Hermione and Snuffles comforted Harry as even Madam Pomfrey couldn't begrudge Harry any amount of comfort after the ordeal he had went through.

Dumbledore had taken immediate measures that same night as he questioned both Barty Crouch Jr. and Wormtail under ministry watch as Cornelius Fudge watched the entirety of the interviews with an incredulous look on his face. Wormtail admitted to committing the crimes Sirius had been accused of along with having a hand in bringing about Voldemort's resurrection earlier that night. Wormtail also admitted to casting the *reducto* curse at Cedric Diggory which ultimately led to his death.

Dumbledore next questioned Barty Crouch Jr. who discussed how he had used polyjuice to maintain his appearance as Moody the entire year. He discussed how he had murdered his father after his father had figured out whom he was and that he was impersonating Moody. He also discussed how he had attempted to help Harry through the tournament as his task and fortunately the Potter boy was a skilled wizard and his only contribution to the ritual was turning the cup into a portkey and placing Krum under the Imperius curse in an attempt to keep Diggory from winning.

Fudge took a few actions. First he drafted up a full pardon for Sirius including a one million galleon compensation package for time served in Azkaban. Dumbledore as head of Wizengamot was able to certify the pardon and in that moment Sirius Black was no longer a criminal. Next, Fudge had the kiss administered to Barty Crouch Jr. by two dementors he had brought along for protection. Fudge had Wormtail detained so that he could be given a proper trial for his crimes and then be sent to Azkaban to serve his time.

Dumbledore was truly pleased with the progress Fudge was helping to make that night until the minister said, "Dumbledore I believe it would be unwise especially following the events of tonight to incite a panic and announce Voldemort's return. If you defy me on this I will have you arrested under those very charges. I will announce his return when the ministry feels it can be done without inciting such a panic. Am I clear Dumbledore?"

Albus sighed realizing his hands were tied and that once again he would make the same mistake as had been made in the past before he replied, "Yes minister now I must return to deal with young Harry and Mr. Diggory's parents."

Fudge smiled and said, "Oh and of course Mr. Potter will be awarded the order of Merlin 3rd class for tonight's heroics. I believe the Prophet will print an article to the effect that Mr. Potter foiled a plot by two former death eaters who attempted to kill the boy-who-lived in an attempt to incite panic. You may inform the boy if you wish."

Dumbledore walked quickly back to the hospital wing eager to give Sirius the good news. Albus also realized he would need to reform the order of the phoenix into its former capacity as a means of providing resistance to Voldemort and his supporters in the time until the ministry would join the fight and then they would join forces.

Dumbledore entered the hospital wing as was pleased to see the scene before him. Harry was cuddled up in his bed with Hermione on one side and Sirius in his animagus form on the other. Dumbledore was pleased that Harry had people that loved him that much and if nothing else that would help him through the days ahead.

Dumbledore shook Snuffles awake and he opened his eyes and then covered one eye with his paw as if he was annoyed to be awoken. Dumbledore chuckled and Snuffles got out of bed and transformed into Sirius. Sirius tiredly said, "Albus is there a reason that you have awoken me when I have been trying to provide comfort to my godson after the night he has been through?"

Dumbledore smiled and said, "Yes Sirius I believe I have a very good reason for this. I have just returned from a meeting with the minister and you have been given a full pardon along with 1 million galleons

as compensation for your unjust imprisonment. I also thought you might like to adopt Harry and perhaps stay at your ancestral home this summer. I believe that Phinneas has informed me that while the house is in some form of disarray it is still unplottable and I will of course volunteer to be your secret keeper.”

Sirius’ smile rivaled the one he used to share so often in his childhood with James Potter after they had played a particularly ingenious prank before he said, “Albus, I know we have had our differences but this news has made many of them go away. Are you sure Harry wants me to adopt him?”

Dumbledore smiled and replied, “Sirius, Ms. Granger brought forth Harry’s desire to be permanently removed from the Dursleys care and I assure you that if you were not available I would have adopted Harry myself. I believe we can have the paperwork pushed through by tomorrow and then you will have 2 months to prepare the house for Harry’s arrival.”

Sirius was stunned and Dumbledore continued amusedly, “I also would like to know if you would care to join an ancient order which I lead that is against the rise of any dark lords. This order existed during Voldemort’s first reign but as you were in a high risk position you were not offered membership. I would request we use your residence as a meeting place. I believe Harry is too young for membership but I will allow him to sit in on meetings because he has done more tonight against Voldemort than any auror short of Alistair Moody achieved in Tom’s first reign. We all have much to discuss, and I believe our 1st meeting will be shortly after school has dismissed. In the meantime I will ask that you help recruit very trustworthy young members to join our group. For now I will leave you with Harry. Feel free to discuss your new arrangements with young Harry at your leisure.”

Sirius was too excited to think and then he looked down at Harry’s pale form in his bed and decided Harry’s well being was more important than his own excitement at the moment as he transformed back into Snuffles and hopped back into bed next to Harry to provide his godson with any comfort he could.

The Weasley's had been offered guest quarters for the night as they discussed the night and how it impacted their world and Harry. Arthur and Percy immediately brought up the fact that Sirius would most likely be pardoned and could adopt Harry as a result of Wormtail's capture. Molly wasn't exactly pleased with the news until Ron and Ginny brought it to her attention that Harry would be happiest with Sirius and she immediately calmed remembering that Harry's well being was more important than her own personal beliefs at the moment.

Ron seemed particularly despondent when he realized how stupid and insignificant his problems were compared to Harry's and how he had been a complete and utter jerk to both Harry and Hermione the entire year aside from one month. Ron knew he had blown any chance at salvaging his friendship with the couple, but he made it a point that he would help them any way they would allow him to.

Even the twins couldn't find it in their hearts to be happy or mischievous when they had seen Harry staring off into space in his hospital bed. They both knew Harry to be the bravest person they had ever met and to see him so lost and seemingly terrified had scared each of them greatly in its own right.

Bill Weasley was holding his younger sister Ginny who wailed about how hard Harry's life had been. She talked to Bill for the 1st time about the events that occurred in the Chamber of Secrets and how Harry had tried to conceal his own injury as he asked Ginny if she was ok after he had defeated the Basilisk. Bill Weasley suddenly found he had even more respect for the 14 year old boy than he ever thought possible.

Ginny meanwhile was saddened that she couldn't be in Hermione's place, comforting Harry after the terrible ordeal he had suffered as she still harbored a small crush for Harry. She was also aware that she liked Neville a lot and for that she was equally happy. Then she realized that everything that Hermione had done for Harry in the past, those actions far exceeded anything Ginny would have or could have done in a similar situation for Harry. It was a bitter pill to swallow giving up on her longtime childhood crush to Harry and a part of her she was certain never would.

The Gryffindor girls generally had a rule that they couldn't take another Gryffindor girl's boyfriend. The problem was that with Harry, the rules typically went out the window. Ginny decided that she would bide her time and see if she either outgrew her crush of Harry or make her move on Harry when Hermione least expected it. She had all of the time in the world and she planned on making use of it to suit her purposes.

Albus returned to his office after his talk with Sirius somewhat pleased that despite Harry's ordeal a great deal of good had come from the night which was all thanks to Harry. Dumbledore sat at his desk as Fawkes trilled to him in an unusual way as it almost appeared that the phoenix was having it out with the old wizard who finally put his hands up in surrender and sighed before he said, "I will tell him when he is well again. I promise it will be before the end of the year. As it is the main reason I have withheld this from him is because it would shorten his childhood. I am afraid now that my foolish belief that he would benefit from growing away from constant attention has backfired quite severely and Harry has suffered as a consequence." Fawkes appeared to accept the explanation as it returned to its roost and let out a short trill of contentment.

Amos Diggory and his wife Sarah were still caught up in the aftermath of their son's death. They were grateful that they had been able to say their final farewells to him and were even able to comfort him in his last moments. They had been so proud of how he shared the cup with Harry as the entire crowd watched Harry save Cedric twice in the maze. They had even winced when Harry screamed as he was bitten by the Acromantula.

They had a great amount of respect for Harry and all that he had done for Cedric, as Cedric had also mentioned that Harry had told him about the dragons for the 1st task simply because it was the fair thing to do. They had even planned on inviting Harry over for dinner at some point in the summer to thank him for his help. Then Cedric returned with the cup and they watched as his life slipped away. They were frightened that Harry was still gone and they had no idea what had happened to Cedric. Then Harry returned and they had been told that Harry had captured Cedric's killer and they were again indebted to Harry Potter. It had been an exhausting night but they both

pledged to help Harry any way they could to honor Cedric's memory and to take upon and reward the faith that Harry so obviously had in Cedric as evidenced by the tournament.

Then Albus Dumbledore approached them about joining an ancient order that was to stand as opposition to Voldemort until a time when they would join the ministry in the fight. Albus also mentioned that protecting Harry was to be a main focus of the order and they both agreed on the spot to do whatever they could to help the young man that had avenged their son and done so much for him while he still lived.

It was a long night but eventually everyone slept a cleansing sleep. Harry awoke the next morning with the horrors of the previous night still fresh in his mind but he was disappointed because he had thought he felt a pair of warm presences with him throughout the night. He was handed his glasses and he saw everyone surrounding his bed. He glanced around Sirius standing there like nothing was wrong. Harry saw him and hissed, "Sirius what are you doing like that it's not safe."

Sirius had the audacity to smile and laugh which caused Harry to frown. Harry immediately began thinking the worst. Maybe Sirius doesn't want me anymore and is trying to get caught. They can't send me back to the Dursley's Dumbledore promised. Everyone around the bed started getting worried by the panicked look on Harry's face before Sirius said, "Harry you caught Wormtail last night. I've been pardoned. I plan on you coming home with me after you finish the term that is if you want to."

Harry's expression immediately changed to a smile before he said, "Wow really Sirius that's great. I just got him because he killed Cedric and I.." Harry's expression immediately changed back to the same vacant stare he had most of the previous night before he pulled out of it and finished his statement, "Anyways I'd love to come live with you during the summers. It's one of the things I've dreamt about for the longest time." Everyone smiled and yet they were concerned at how quickly Harry went from happy to detached and back to happy again in a few short moments.

Hermione then grasped Harry's hand and softly said, "Harry if you are wondering why you woke up alone this morning it is because that Sirius woke me up when he got up and as much as I wanted to cuddle with you all day we do have to deal with last night ok?"

Harry nodded and took a deep breath and said, "Ok I'll do my best to stay with you for all of this. Ask me what you need to."

Hermione smiled sadly and said, "No Harry you told us everything last night. There are things that we need to tell you about last night that you aren't aware of." Harry nodded and Hermione continued, "Harry we watched the entire task. We saw the Skrewts and how you saved Cedric from them, we saw you deal with the Boggart, we saw you figure out the riddle of the Sphinx, we saw you deal with Viktor while he was under the Imperius, and we even saw you save Cedric from the Acromantula and get bitten yourself. We saw everything until you touched the cup and you told us everything after that ok?"

Harry smiled and nodded thankful he wouldn't have to retell the same story he had apparently told last night even though he had no memory of anything after the headmaster had returned for him at the stadium.

Ludo Bagman who Harry had not noticed earlier simply said, "Um, Harry here are your winnings. I already attempted to give Mr. and Mrs. Diggory Cedric's half but um, they said that you deserved to have it all."

Harry frowned and asked, "How did Cedric die? I mean I remember assuming he was dead but I have no idea how he died. Did he die well?"

Hermione spoke up and said, "He came back with the cup and was bleeding quite badly. He was still conscious though. He spoke to his parents and Cho and they all said their final farewells before he passed. Madam Pomfrey said there was nothing that could be done for him."

Harry nodded and allowed a small smile to crease his lips before he said, "Good, that's good."

Everyone relaxed at this point and Dumbledore finally spoke, "Harry as Sirius said earlier Wormtail has confessed to his crimes and will be given a trial to determine his sentence. I assume it will be for life in Azkaban. Barty Crouch Jr. on the other hand was given the kiss last night after he confessed to killing his father a week ago. Moody has been retrieved and is well considering the circumstances. He has even proclaimed his pride in your actions despite the fact that he never actually taught you. Finally, the ministry has awarded you the order of Merlin 3rd class."

Harry shook his head and replied, "I'll only accept the award if Cedric is given one also. I mean I would have been dead if he hadn't told you where I was sir."

Everyone looked at Harry with even more respect than before. Albus' eyes were twinkling wildly as he said, "Harry I am quite sure that the minister would be more than happy to acquiesce your stipulation. There is more that we need to talk about but I am sure they both can wait until you are better."

Everyone else kept their comments short with Harry except to wish him their best wishes. Eventually everyone left aside from Sirius and Hermione who simply sat with Harry in silence. Eventually Harry quietly said, "You know Voldemort looked different than I thought he would. I expected him to look like the devil but he looked normal aside from his eyes. His eyes were blood red and they seemed to glow. When he looked at me I felt ashamed and I don't even know why."

Hermione and Sirius glanced at each other before Sirius said, "Your dad told me about the 1st time he saw him. He described him a lot like you did. We'll have time this summer to talk about your parents so you can finally understand how great they really were. Harry, I know for a fact that both of your parents would be beyond proud of the young man you've become. You need to always remember that ok?"

Harry nodded and said, "I think last night has been coming for a long time. I am just glad I survived and I can learn from it."

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand and she softly said, "Harry we are all glad that you made it back last night safely. Just know that you can tell either of us anything and we won't ever think you are weak or stupid. We want to help you Harry because we love you ok?"

Harry smiled and replied, "I know and I love both of you too. I actually have told you everything I remember from last night aside from one thing that I think Professor Dumbledore should be here for. It's nothing bad more like it saved my life last night and I don't have an explanation for it. Did I tell you that our wands locked up last night?" Hermione and Sirius nodded and Harry smiled and said, "Good then you both know everything about last night. Do you know when I can leave the hospital wing?"

Hermione smiled and said, "Madam Pomfrey said you can leave tonight. Are you sure you are ready to go back to class on Monday?"

Harry smiled and said, "As long as people treat me like they normally do then I think I am."

Sirius smiled and said, "I'll talk to the Albus about putting a good word in for you so that people know not to bug you ok kiddo?"

Harry smiled and said, "If I can get that then I won't have any complaints."

A/N: **Keep reviewing.** Not the most action packed chapter but I needed to set the proverbial table for the coming months in Harry's world and how those around him will interact.

Chapter 10

Harry was released from the hospital wing Sunday night and he was welcomed quietly back into the dorms of Gryffindor house. Harry spent a little while Sunday evening working on his homework and then ultimately decided to spend his evenings the coming week studying in the library and perhaps even working ahead a little.

Monday morning Harry rolled out of bed and took a shower as he cleaned himself he glanced over the new scars that he had gained Saturday. He had a long thin scar on his left forearm and a round purple scar right in the middle of his left thigh from the Acromantula. After he took a little longer than normal dressing himself as he also fought to keep his composure, Harry grabbed his book bag and walked down the stairs in his typical Dursley throwaways. Hermione joined Harry as she gave her boyfriend a reassuring smile and hug as he took her book bag despite her protests and they walked hand in hand down to the great hall.

Upon entering the great hall many sets of eyes immediately focused upon Harry as they walked over to the Gryffindor table and took their seats. Dumbledore stood and spoke loudly as he said, "All of you are aware of Saturday night's events in one capacity or another. Simply stated, Harry Potter successfully captured two deatheaters including the one responsible for Cedric Diggory's death. At the end of the year feast we will have a proper service for Cedric and the ministry also has wished that there be a ceremony in his honor at that time as well. For now and the last 2 months of the term I ask that you respect Mr. Potter's wishes and treat him normally and not act rudely by asking questions of a sensitive nature."

Breakfast was a quiet affair as the only ones who dared speak with Harry were Hermione, Neville, and Ginny. They discussed exam preparation and then Hermione went into long detail about the need to begin OWL exam preparations this year so that next year wouldn't be as bad. They were all surprised when Harry made his opinion known that he was in agreement with Hermione to which the rest of the Gryffindor 4th years rolled their eyes and ignored the couple for the remainder of the meal.

Classes the 1st week after the 3rd task were thankfully very pleasant as Harry continued his tutoring session with Hermione and Harry closed in on his final preparations for the placement exams for Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. Harry and Hermione spent hours on end in the library finishing their assignments for the term so they could study hard for their finals and work ahead on the revision schedules Hermione had drafted for OWL studies. Due to Moody's abduction and the loss of the impostor instructor DADA had been cancelled for the remainder of the term and no exams had been planned.

Durmstrang and Beauxbatons finally left in the 3rd week of May as Harry shared warm goodbyes with both Viktor and Fleur who aside from Harry were the only people who had any idea what surviving the tournament was like. Hermione's parents had taken their time in drafting a response to the letter she had written after the 3rd task and it read,

Hermione,

Your father and I are deeply saddened and yet proud of Harry for all that he has gone through this year. I know we have never met the boy formally but your letters have spoken volumes about his character and we are both impressed by the picture you have drawn with your letters over the years.

We are not aware if he has accommodations for the summer yet but from the sounds of things his godfather may be able to have him this summer after all. We still would like to be formally introduced to Harry at the station this year and also we would like to invite him to come with us on our annual summer vacation. We also do not know what security precautions we should take now that this purported dark wizard has returned. Maybe you could ask your headmaster to come for a visit to better fill us in on what steps we can take to ensure our and your safety this summer. Harry's owl Hedwig seems to be quite aware of Harry's condition as she has went from a very depressed manner when she initially came with your letter to a hopeful and cheery demeanor when we deliver it. Please stay safe dear and if Harry needs someone to talk to, please be there for him.

Love,

Mum and Dad

May plowed forward and Harry took his placement exam for Runes and Arithmancy and easily passed the requirements and was granted a spot in each class for his 5th year. Harry and Hermione continued to work hard and the news of the war with Voldemort had been kept silent by the ministry. Voldemort's 1st rise to power had occurred similarly as there were random acts for a long period as Voldemort gained forces and then he had begun to attack in earnest when his force was complete. Dumbledore had indicated to Harry during one of their meetings regarding the pensieve the truth of the statement by sharing several memories of those times. Harry's rapidly growing mastery of Occlumency and his burgeoning talent for Legilimency continued as Dumbledore promised Harry that he would be able to avoid an attack from Voldemort anything short of forced Legilimency through the scar or a possession attempt which Harry didn't care for the sounds of either.

Finally the final weekend of May had come and Dumbledore decided it was time to keep his promise to Fawkes. Dumbledore summoned Harry to his office and calmly said, "Harry what I tell you today is of the utmost importance that only those you trust with your life may hear."

Harry frowned and said, "Sir, I believe at this point I have shown myself worthy of your trust so you needn't bother with these formalities."

Albus smiled and said, "Very well Harry I just needed to ensure you were aware of the weight and importance of what I am about to tell you." Harry nodded and Albus continued, "15 years ago I had a meeting with a young witch who was seeking employment here at Hogwarts as a divination teacher. Her grandmother had been gifted with the ability of sight and therefore I hope that her ability had transferred to her granddaughter a young Sybil Trelawney. The meeting was hardly informative and as I realized I had wasted the afternoon before she broke into a trance and said,

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the 7th month dies...And the Dark Lord will mark him as an equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not.. And either must die must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survive.

“Harry it is my firm belief that this prophecy refers to you. I believe it indicates you are the only one with the power to defeat Tom and therefore you hold a great importance in the times ahead. I have been aware of this fact for quite some time and yet I have held this information from you because I prayed you could have a childhood free of such burdens.” Albus spoke as warmly as he could manage.

Harry took a couple of deep breaths processing everything he had been told by his headmaster. The voice in Harry’s head simply said, “Based upon your experiences this really shouldn’t surprise you. The only way you will live to defeat him is if you accept the burden and resolve to finish the war before too many lives are lost.”

Harry finally spoke as he said, “I appreciate your honesty sir and yet I do not appreciate your methods in how you have dealt with me over the last 13 years. You have done nothing more than casually move me about as you’ve deemed fit even though I am quite sure my parents would have risked some small measure of my safety in return for a proper upbringing. You surely must have been aware of the treatment I received at the hands of the Dursleys and if you weren’t it only indicates you negligently placed me there without checking in on me. As a result sir you have effectively decided for me that I was to grow up without have one loving relationship in my life until I came to Hogwarts. As it was you deprived me of any childhood I might have ever had. I hold no grudges at this point but you won’t receive any forgiveness from me either sir.”

Harry walked out of the office with his head held high as Albus sighed and looked to Fawkes who carried a look that said, “I told you so old man.”

Final exams were rather easy as Harry felt confident exiting his final exams and was fairly confident he managed all O’s and E’s aside from Divination which Harry made a point to deliberately make

outlandish claims to see if any came true because he had no reason to do well on the exam because he had no intention of actually taking the OWL in the class.

Hermione had finally freed Skeeter on the condition that she would stop writing slanderous articles about herself or Harry. She could write articles about them as long as they were honest and properly researched. The threat of bringing up her unregistered animagus status with the ministry was all Hermione needed to get Skeeter to agree to the deal.

Finally the end of the year had come and the leaving feast was being served as Harry sat with Hermione at the Gryffindor table. It had been nearly two months since the 3rd task and while Harry didn't dwell on the events of the day, he did make sure to learn from his mistakes of the day and vowed to work his hardest to ensure it wouldn't happen again.

Albus stood and calmly said, "Today we celebrate another year that has come to an end at Hogwarts. This year we have learned much about ourselves collectively as a school. We have learned to dance, some of us have learned to love, many of us have learned to stand for what we believe in, and we have all learned the power of a loss. The loss I speak of was a fellow student and friend, Cedric Diggory. Cedric Diggory was an exemplary young man. His life may have been shorter than we all wished but that doesn't detract from what was still a life well lived. Cedric personified what many of us strive to be in our lives. Cedric made honorable decisions and lived with the consequences of his actions. Cedric Diggory died a hero because a coward killed him when Cedric made no move to threaten the man at all. We are in a dark time in our world and we must remember to extol the qualities of Cedric as he was. He was a loyal young man and he did not fear the dark. Cedric lived in the light and died protecting it so more of us could live amongst it. I ask you all to raise your goblets to toast Cedric Diggory, a true friend and an honorable man." The entire hall was silent as every student raised their goblets in honor of their fellow fallen student.

Harry appeared to be a little choked up before he stood up and spoke himself as every eye in the hall fell upon him, "I just want to say that

Cedric taught me something important. Cedric taught me that all of us are extraordinary in our own way. I remember before the 2nd task he told me I was barmy.” Titters went through the hall as Harry smiled and he continued, “At the time he told me, I thought that it was amazing how he could make even someone who didn’t know him too well like me, feel like I had known him my entire life. Cedric taught me that you needn’t be someone’s friend to say something kind. You needn’t be someone’s friend to comfort a person in need. Finally, he taught me you needn’t fear the unknown in life as long as you have faith in yourself. I was there that night as Cedric was hit by that curse. I was the one who asked him to take the cup back to the castle and grab the headmaster. In a way I felt responsible for his death. I thought for awhile that if I hadn’t done this or I hadn’t done that then he still might be alive. But looking back at my time spent with Cedric I learned that I wouldn’t or couldn’t change a single thing I did that night and knowing Cedric like I did he wouldn’t have changed it either. Cedric Diggory made a choice that night just as I had during the 3rd task. The choice he made was to encounter hardship because it was the right thing to do and not the easy thing to do. I want us to toast to Cedric Diggory a friend to those who sought friends and a man who never sought the easy road. To Cedric, a good man with a great heart.” The entire hall stood and clapped as Harry sat down not bothering to mask his emotions as his eyes filled with tears and ran down his face.

Finally, Albus had asked for the applause to stop and he said, “Today we honor the life of Cedric Diggory as he will be awarded the Order of Merlin 3rd Class posthumously for his actions the night of the 3rd task. The award has also been given to Mr. Potter who has deferred a ceremony and insisted today be about Cedric alone. For one final time let us toast to Cedric Diggory.” The entire hall toasted one last time before Albus smiled and said, “May his next adventure be as grand as his last. I wish you all safety and happiness for the summer. I will see you again in the fall, you are dismissed.”

Harry sat on the express on the trip back following the long year he had just experienced. He had found love and he had found his destiny. He had found family and he had found that he was loved. As Harry snuggled with Hermione they shared a book and read as the

other passengers in the compartment watched Harry and Hermione find their own little world in the pages of the book.

About an hour before they arrived at the station Harry excused himself from the compartment and found the Weasley twins testing some of their products on unsuspecting 1st years. Harry broke up their fun when he said, "Hey you two I have to talk to you about something."

Harry and the twins found an empty compartment as Harry ushered them in. Harry manufactured the bag of galleons holding his prize for winning the tournament. Harry softly said, "I want you guys to have this so you can start your joke shop like you wanted to. Just don't tell your mum that I gave it to you."

Fred and George glanced at each other before they said, "Harry you don't need to give us your prize money mate you earned it rightfully."

Harry shook his head and said, "No I don't deserve it. Cedric died because of the stupid tournament and I don't want to profit from it. Please take this and do something good with it ok?" Harry handed the bag to Fred who pocketed it and looked at George who simply nodded.

The twins looked at Harry and solemnly said, "Harry if we take this, it makes you our silent partner. That means you can have any products you ever want and even give input on the running of the shop." Harry nodded and they continued, "We both want you to know how much this means to us mate." They both gave Harry a hug before they all parted company and returned to their original compartments.

Too soon the ride back to King's Cross was over as Harry and Hermione joined her parents as had been agreed.

Hermione hugged both of her parents warmly as Harry said, "Hello Mr. and Mrs. Granger I am Harry Potter, Hermione's best friend and boyfriend."

Hermione's mother stepped forward and pulled Harry into a hug before she said, "Hello Harry dear. I am Elizabeth Granger and this is Hermione's father David."

David Granger offered his hand as Harry shook it looking the man straight in his eyes. David simply said, "Hermione chooses her friends wisely Harry, and I am proud that you are her boyfriend." Harry smiled and nodded.

They discussed how Harry and Hermione had fared in their classes for the year and talked briefly about how they had a friend who was a therapist and if Harry ever needed someone private to talk to all he needed to do was ask. They also discussed the potential of Harry going on vacation with them to Greece which excited both Harry and Hermione greatly.

They eventually broke apart as Hermione gave Harry a kiss on the lips before she said, "I'll be expecting a letter Harry every other day so we can make plans for the summer. I love you so much Harry."

Harry smiled and replied, "I love you too 'Mione." They shared one last kiss before Harry took his trunk and Hedwig's cage and walked towards Sirius who stood a few feet away.

Sirius had gotten a haircut and had shaved. He looked at least 5 years younger and the only thing that indicated he had spent time in Azkaban were that his eyes were still somewhat dull even though Harry could see a glow there he had never seen before. Sirius smiled and said, "Hey Kiddo ready to go home?"

Harry just smiled and nodded not sure how he should respond to actually having someone who cared for him during the summer. Sirius released Hedwig after he read the address of the manor in her ear. He shrunk down Harry's trunk and cage and grabbed Harry's arm. With a soft pop they were gone and the next chapter in Harry Potter's life was set to begin.

A/N: Please Review. The next several chapters will take place during the summer between 4th and 5th year. Review and tell me how I did with Cedric's tribute toasts. Thanks for reading and reviewing.

Chapter 11

The days following the end of term led to numerous changes in the ministry and its handling of Voldemort. Fudge continued to deny Voldemort's reappearance blaming it on his insane followers attempting to dredge up a panic. He had taken proactive measures to protect against the so call unorganized attacks even though each seemed to strike the homes of muggleborn students. Harry had never been so glad as when Hermione had asked the headmaster to ward her home and to give her family emergency portkeys to Black Manor or less affectionately known as 12 Grimmauld Place.

The minister's more proactive measures included, lowering the underage magical use statutes down to 15 which Harry was delighted to know would allow him to practice magic freely upon his birthday. The minister had also increased auror enrollment and had signed on several personnel movements placing several ministry people in and around Hogwarts for the coming term. He had even placed his undersecretary in the vacant DADA position as a means to have some clout at the school. He only had one last plan remaining and it would involve getting the full support of the board of governors to give his undersecretary the position of high inquisitor. Fudge was aware Hogwarts hadn't needed such a position in over 500 years but he figured it was a historical time and drastic measures were needed to ensure ministry success.

The days following his pardon Sirius had gone to work on his family's ancestral home. Sirius had originally found Grimmauld in terrible condition and Dumbledore consented to allow two house elves to come into the service of himself and Harry, because the previous Black family house elf had passed away in the 13 years he had been a convict. Sirius completely renovated every room in the house with the help of Dobby and Winky. Dobby was bonded to Harry but he was still paid and could terminate the bonding whenever he chose to. Winky was bonded to Sirius and although she had initially refused to be paid, Sirius made her agree in order to be bonded with the same conditions as Dobby had.

Sirius took care in making 5 guest rooms for any order members that might wish to stay overnight after a meeting. The rooms were all rather plain but covered the basic amenities nicely and had their own private bathrooms. Sirius knew that in all probability Hermione and her parents would have to be moved before the end of the war because they were a very attractive target. So, Sirius made David and Elizabeth a room and then took an anteroom of the library and made it into Hermione's bedroom. Sirius took a long time in warding the adult Grangers room so that it could still function as a muggle room with electricity without the interference of magic. Sirius figured he would let Hermione decorate her room any way that she wanted to just as he was going to allow Harry to do.

Sirius also constructed a small guest room for Remus who wouldn't accept anything too large per his nature and he also constructed a safe room for Remus on full moons if he had no other options. Sirius loved his friend dearly and any peace of mind he could afford him was well worth any amount of Galleons he had.

The crown jewel of Sirius' work was the state of the art training room he had constructed to work himself back into shape and to give Harry suitable space to work on his magic in both duel and practical techniques. There was a small oval track on the perimeter and free weights were also found in the room.

Sirius finally reached the last two rooms of the 3rd floor by the beginning of June, as one was to be for Harry to arrange any way he wanted while the other was for him. Sirius had simply left the two largest rooms of the manor for himself and Harry. Sirius remembered his apartment he had lived in his time after Hogwarts and before Azkaban and he laughed thinking how much of a bachelor's pad it was. Sirius figured he was old enough where he should start settling down and start looking for a wife. He loved Harry like a son but he also wanted to have children of his own to pass on his devastating good looks. Now all he needed to learn was some modesty and humility.

Harry's arrival to Black Manor was a festive event as Sirius gave Harry a tour of the manor and told him that he could decorate his room and way he wanted to. Dobby and Winky were initially

persistent that Harry allow them to do the work but Harry declined stating that they both would be better served working on the parlor room which was to house the meetings for the order. Sirius had insisted that he take Harry clothes shopping because he felt bad for his godson after seeing the clothes he wore. Harry's 1st full day back for the summer they spent the entire day clothes shopping all over London as they started the day at Diagon Alley by getting Harry new robes and shoes. Next, Sirius took Harry to the Black family tailor to get him a set of muggle clothing to wear under his robes or out in the muggle world as he had gotten a variety of shirts, slacks, and accessories. Harry had to admit that having clothes that fit was a vast improvement over before and he hoped that Hermione would like his new look.

Harry decided to start his room the next day after he had drawn up plans for what he wanted the room to look like. After he debated for awhile he decided to use calming colors in contrast to the bright red and gold colors of Gryffindor that he had seen every day at school. Harry painted his room cornflower which was a pale blue and adorned his room with several comfortable reading chairs and some simple book cases. Harry just wanted the room to be the calm in his otherwise hectic life and he believed he accomplished his goal beautifully.

Sirius took his spare time after Harry's arrival and began searching for some younger members to recruit for the order. He immediately thought of his cousin Andromeda, who declined membership but suggested her daughter and Sirius' second cousin Nymphadora Tonks, a fresh young auror who also happened to be a metamorphagus. The young woman immediately agreed under the condition that she only be called Tonks because she hated her 1st name.

Harry's first 3 weeks of his summer break could easily be described as some of the best of his life. Thanks to the house being unplottable Harry was able to practice magic freely when he designed and renovated his room. After he finished his room Harry asked Sirius for his help with Animagus training they began in earnest his 4th day there. Harry found the process to be exhausting as he practiced various human transfiguration spells that he wouldn't need to know

until 6th year but that Sirius had maintained were necessary to mastering the transformation. Owing largely to the fact that Harry was working 12 hours a day with Sirius on the transformation he was surprised when Sirius told him that he was prepared to take the animagus potion on the 5th of July and had completed his training in around 2 weeks.

Sirius and Harry wanted to take the potion early so that he would have time to rest and would be prepared for the 1st order meeting later in the evening. Sirius gave Harry the potion that tasted like olive oil and had roughly the same consistency. Once Harry got the viscous fluid down his throat he immediately felt like his insides were on fire. Harry dropped to his knees as he clutched his ribs in pain. Sirius watched everything impassively as he had already warned Harry what would happen if he did indeed have a form. Sirius watched as Harry shifted and slowly he found himself with four paws and brown and gray fur covering his body. Harry could smell everything around him. Harry looked up at Sirius who had a look of pride before Harry felt the potion wearing off. Harry looked up as he felt like his entire body had been dropped off of a building as Sirius helped him to a chair. Harry tiredly asked, "So Sirius what am I?"

Sirius smiled and said, "Well I have to say the Marauders are truly now just a group of dogs. Harry you are a very wicked looking Coyote."

Harry smiled and asked, "That's great Sirius, but how long will it take me for me to master to transformation."

Sirius smiled and said, "Based on your progress so far, and the fact that your form isn't too large I would say less than a month kiddo. That's good because Moony needs to see your form, and then we can give you a proper Marauder nickname."

The first meeting of the new Order of the Phoenix displayed two different and dominant groups affectionately known as the old school of thought and the kiddies table. The old school of thought group was a motley collection of some of the greatest and most unique wizards of light of the age lead by Albus Dumbledore. While the other group was represented by their leader Remus Lupin and his group of misfit

but unique and enthusiastic wizards called the kiddies table originally coined affectionately by Mad Eye Moody.

The old school of thought group so coined by the kiddies included Albus Dumbledore, Aberforth Dumbledore, Dedalus Diggle, Elphias Doge, Arabella Figg, Mundungus Fletcher, Rubeus Hagrid, Minerva McGonagall, Mad Eye Moody, Severus Snape, Arthur Weasley, and Molly Weasley.

The kiddies included Sirius, Remus, Tonks, Bill Weasley, Charlie Weasley, Hestia Jones, Sturgis Podmore, Emmeline Vance, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and unofficial member Harry. The kiddies typically wanted to wage a much more aggressive resistance than the old school of thought led by Albus and this led to some conflict in the meetings.

Harry liked all of the members of the order because they were each incredibly unique in their views and while it would take a while to make a decision, the final decisions of the order were infused with almost every conceivable view point.

Tonks, Shacklebolt, and Hestia Jones all worked with the ministry in some capacity as Kingsley and Tonks were Aurors and Hestia worked as a ministry liaison to magical creatures. Kingsley was a tall black man with a shaved head and a stud earring. He had a deep booming voice and his laughs could frequently be heard as Tonks and Sirius cracked jokes during meetings. Tonks was typically seen as a lanky young woman with spiked hair that was typically colored pink. Tonks immediately took to Harry and unofficially adopted him as a little brother. Hestia Jones was a non-descript round faced witch who was described as merry and jovial amongst the order.

Bill Weasley worked as a curse breaker for Gringott's and wore a dragon tooth ear ring with the typical Weasley red hair tied up in a ponytail. He was very knowledgeable in regards to curses and was the order member who was the liaison with the goblins. Charlie Weasley looked like an older version of the twins as he was slightly stockier than Bill, Ron, and Percy and yet was obviously athletic as he worked with dragons in Romania. Charlie would still marvel at how Harry had dealt with the horntail in the tri-wizard tournament but

Harry would always divert his attention from the uncomfortable topic with talks of Quiditch because Charlie had been the seeker for Gryffindor before Harry.

Harry was, in essence, the mascot of the group and still added to the discussions as he held more experience than almost everyone else in deatheater behavior and fighting tactics. Emmeline Vance was a stately and beautiful blond haired witch who Sirius salivated over during meetings when he wasn't causing trouble. She rarely spoke but when she did she made good points that indicated she had thought them out. Sirius tended to be a distraction in the meetings but his eyes carried an intensity that indicated to all present that when it came time to go to battle he would be focused and on the front lines. Sirius had been James Potter's auror partner until he was dismissed early in his career by Barty Crouch Sr. due to suspicions of his loyalties. Remus tended to be the organizing and moderate voice of the group. Of course even Remus compared too radical compared to those who shared the old school train of thought.

The 1st order meeting dealt with the inductions and introductions of new members as they also set forth the charter of the group that simply said, "The Order of The Phoenix was designed to prevent the rise of dark lords and if failing in the 1st task then we are to provide resistance against the dark until a time when the ministry can focus its forces at our side."

Albus appeared quite pleased with the recruiting efforts and ensured Harry after the meeting that Hermione could be informed of the general workings of the group as long as he didn't give away any specifics.

After the order meeting was dismissed Harry, Remus, and Sirius discussed Harry's animagus form. After some gentle prodding from Sirius, Harry was coerced into his first unaided transformation and after he had successfully transformed, Remus' eyes lit up much like Sirius' eyes had before as Harry transformed into a coyote. Remus simply said, "You really are an unusual looking coyote with those green eyes of yours. But I'm with Padfoot when I see you are now a Marauder in everything but name. We'll have something prepared for you by the time the summer is over. Then we'll need the map the

make the necessary alterations. You can work with Hermione this year at Hogwarts if she is interested in the training also.”

Harry had written Hermione every other day as she had asked and Hermione had received permission from her parents to spend all of August at Grimmauld. There would be no trip to Greece because her parents opted against a family vacation abroad in Greece with the wizarding war on the horizon, and decided to just take a week off in the middle of July to invite Harry over to their home and relax with their daughter.

David and Elizabeth Granger had always considered themselves practical people. They had gotten married right out of dental school and Hermione was born 9 months later. They were always proud of Hermione as she grew up because, she had learned to read before she was 4 and was always a bright and engaging child. It came as a surprise to both David and Elizabeth when Hermione started primary school and that she had no friends and often was picked upon at school for her love of reading and learning.

Hermione had slowly withdrawn from the social activities at school and had become less outgoing in class and when she did speak she tried to impress everyone with her knowledge. Then one magical day the letter had come in the mail. Hermione had just missed the age requirement by less than 3 weeks at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. They were understandably skeptical of the letter as they believed the letter to be a sad joke to play upon gullible parents who had money to spend.

It came as a shock to both when a Professor McGonagall from the school arrived at their doorstep one evening and explained the history of the magical world and demonstrated some simple magic that Hermione would learn in her 1st year. Hermione had immediately reverted back to the bright and engaging child that her parents knew in her 1st year of primary school. She read often and even had come out of her shell at her primary school even though friends were still not forthcoming. Hermione was unperturbed by this however as an entirely new world had been opened to her and with that another chance to make friends.

It was a hard day as they took their daughter to a muggleborn orientation for those children born to non-magical parents. They had to travel to London and visit a magical community called Diagon Alley. While Hermione did not make any friends at the meeting she did whet her appetite further to learn as much magic as she could. Then she had left for school on a train and they could only wait for their daughter to write and tell them of this new world. Her 1st letter was primarily about her classes although she did mention a small boy with black hair rimmed glasses and brilliant green eyes that had been famous for something or the other and that Hermione had met on the train. They were understandably happy to have mention of another human being in her letters aside from a professor even though she didn't appear to know the boy aside from saying he appeared to be polite and didn't make fun of her.

Her next letter was less optimistic as she had written that the small boy had become friends with a rude redheaded boy that always made fun of her because she always raised her hand in class. While she never said the boy with glasses was rude she merely said that he had never said anything in her defense either. The remainder of the letter was about all the magic she had learned and how her professors were.

The 3rd letter they received showed a tremendous change as she described how the small boy with black hair and green eyes had saved her life when a creature was set loose in the school and found her in the bathroom. She mentioned how the green eyed boy had risked his life for her without a second thought and how she had broken a rule for him by lying to her professors about why he had been in the girl's bathroom in the first place. There was no mention of classes just of how brave and kind the green eyed boy was. Finally, the dark haired green eyed boy with glasses was given a name Harry Potter. David and Elizabeth were initially worried about how their daughter's life may have been in danger while at her school but they were thrilled that someone thought enough of their baby girl to save her without any thought to their own safety.

The letters over the years always included some mention of Harry Potter and how he always was doing something kind for her and how she put up with his other friend a Ron Weasley because Harry had

few friends just like Hermione. Finally, at the end of her 3rd year she described a magical night she had with the Harry Potter as they had flown high on the skies on a mythical creature and how Harry had performed some amazing magic and in the process had saved his godfather's life and the day. They always figured that Hermione exaggerated about the adventures she shared with Harry Potter because there was no conceivable way that such a young boy could do the things Hermione described.

However, Hermione's past year revealed the dark side of the magical world and how Harry Potter had been unfairly placed in a tournament reserved for those that were three years older than him. Then they received the letter where Hermione indicated that she was dating Harry and their hearts warmed when she described how he stood up for her when no one else would and how she believed in him when no one else could or would in the past and during the tournament. Then they received the letter indicating Harry's past and how he had grown up in a household without love or any of the common comforts of caring parents.

Hermione's final letter of the term described how her Harry had witnessed the murder of a fellow tournament contestant and that he had been devastated for several days afterwards. It was at this time that they realized how much danger existed in Hermione's new world, and that Harry Potter might have actually done the things Hermione had claimed in her letters. They both knew that their daughter would crumble if she was taken away from Harry, who she now freely proclaimed in her letters to be in love with, and how he had reciprocated her love.

After the four years of letters and brief glances shared at the station, they were anxious to spend some time with the young man their daughter was in love with, to see how he was. Beyond introductions they had shared at the station at the beginning of the summer and the one time they spotted him in Flourish and Bott's they really had no idea what to make of Harry Potter. Their 1st impression of Harry after their brief discussion at the station was favorable, as he had been friendly and amiable and he even had the respect to look David in the eye as he shook his hand. They both knew one thing for certain, being Harry Potter was anything but dull.

A/N: Please Review. This chapter sort of wandered but I wanted to catch everything up through the first 3 weeks of the summer and also give a little more character detail.

Chapter 12

Harry awoke from a long night of sleep as he had spent most of the previous day transforming into his animagus form for extended periods of time. It was also the day when Harry would be given his full marauder status along side his father. Harry was also excited because he would soon be spending a week with Hermione and her parents.

Harry went downstairs to enjoy the breakfast that Dobby and Winky had made. Harry found that while Dobby and Winky weren't the typical house elf, that they truly enjoyed doing something for Harry and Sirius. Harry felt guilty because he was aware of Hermione's thought on house elves but in his defense the two elves were paid weekly and had a choice in their employment. Harry figured that in time they could probably get more elves to accept similar treatment which at the very least would be a great improvement over their present treatment.

Shaking the heavy thoughts from his mind Harry spotted Dobby smiling widely as Sirius was sitting at the table drinking some coffee and nibbling on a muffin. "So Padfoot, ready for the big unveiling today?" Harry asked with a smile on his face.

Sirius smiled and replied, "Yeah pup I think today ought to be a lot of fun. You have the map with you?" Harry flashed the Marauder's map before he returned it to his pocket and poured himself a glass of pumpkin juice as he nibbled on some toast.

Remus came in through the front door with an uncharacteristically wide grin adorning his face. He spotted Harry and said, "So Harry, ready for a long day of being furry?"

Harry smiled and said, "Yeah Moony I just have to imagine I'm Padfoot and it seems so natural."

Sirius glanced towards Harry and sarcastically said, "Wow Harry, you just think that one up?"

Harry snorted indignantly and finished his toast before he took care of his dishes. Remus and Sirius were having a good laugh at Harry's reaction to the dig before Harry returned from the kitchen with a bucket full of ice water. Harry pulled out his wand and was smirking evilly. Remus and Sirius glanced at Harry before they conjured water filled buckets of their own. Ten minutes later the only three true surviving marauders were soaked in water but laughing mirthfully. They all were aware that moments like the one they had just shared were the reason for dealing with the evils of the world like Voldemort. At that moment as they laughed and felt the joy of the moment they realized that everything was perfect and eventually it would all be ok.

After they had all been given towels by Winky who was looking at them disapprovingly they dried off before Remus the voice of reason said, "Ok you two I think it's time we tested young Harry here with the transformation. If he is able to hold it for an hour straight then we will give you the nickname we have selected." Harry nodded and effortlessly the coyote with the green eyes had reappeared. Harry was a large coyote with brown and gray fur but his most striking feature were those emerald green eyes that always appeared to be looking right into your soul. Sirius transformed into Padfoot and they played for the balance of the hour. Sirius was still the larger animal but Harry's form belied a certain lithe physical power that was still developing.

The hour finally arrived as Sirius shifted out of his form effortlessly after years of practice. They both looked at Harry expectantly before he shifted out of his form effortlessly and all that was left was Harry sporting a massive grin on his face.

Sirius and Remus looked at each other as seriously as they could. It was as if they were deciding the fate of the world before Sirius turned towards Harry grinning as he said, "Welcome to the Marauders, *Howler*."

They both walked over to Harry and enveloped him into a tight embrace as their little family they had started nearly 20 years earlier in the halls of Hogwarts, had just grown again after it had been so weakened for so long. In that moment both Remus and Sirius healed a little bit more from the loss of James that still pained them so much.

Then they realized they weren't replacing James after all, they were adding Harry.

The remainder of the day Harry and Sirius ran around the house in their forms as Remus mock menacingly chased them around with a rolled up newspaper. When it was time for Remus to leave they were all saddened realizing just how fun the day had been. Harry glanced at the two who had sad looks adorning their faces before he softly said, "You know, there will be more days like this."

They both glanced at Harry and their frowns dissolved because for all of the times they had looked at Harry they always had seen James with Lily's eyes. Now when they looked at a very vulnerable Harry they finally saw James' looks with Lily's soul shining through. They each remembered how Lily seemed to be the only one in their little family who even in the darkest days of the war against Voldemort could put a smile on the face of each of the Marauders by merely saying the right words at the right moment. Their hearts healed a little bit more realizing that they never truly lost Lily or James because they still had all of the great memories they shared as a family and they had each other. But most importantly, now they had Harry.

Harry was exhausted after spending most of the day in his form. It was easy to do now but any animagus holding their form for a long time would suffer some exhaustion. Harry suddenly remembered Scabbers in 3rd year and how he always slept. Suddenly Harry realized that if he had known more back then it would have been so obvious and maybe Cedric would still be alive. However, not wanting to go down a train of thought that surely would lead to more heartache, Harry cleared his mind and went to bed knowing the next day he would see Hermione and get to know her parents.

Harry awoke rather early at around 7 am. Harry packed the small trunk Sirius had gotten him with a weeks worth of clothes. Harry grabbed his wand and placed it into his wrist holster that he had gotten the same day as the trunk. Harry went down stairs and gave Sirius a hug before he took the FLOO to the Grangers after he said the password to enter their FLOO. Harry uttered, "Prongs" before he pinched the FLOO powder in his hand and said "Granger's residence."

Harry arrived in Hermione's living room for the 1st time in his life. He realized that for the 1st time using FLOO travel he hadn't fallen unceremoniously on his bum. He secretly wondered if it had anything to do with his form. Of course all of those thoughts were thrown aside when he was tackled to the ground by a tight hug from Hermione as Harry braced his fall with his hand that gave awkwardly when he landed. Harry grunted because his wrist flashed with pain before Hermione broke the hug and looked at Harry whose face was contorted into a grimace. She softly asked, "Are you ok Harry?"

Harry forced a smile which wasn't something Hermione was accustomed to seeing before he ground out, "I uh think my landing might have been faulty."

Hermione looked at Harry quizzically before she asked, "What do you mean Harry you made it through the FLOO fine?"

At this point the pain from his broken wrist was surging up and down his right arm. Harry shivered unconsciously before Hermione looked down at Harry's right wrist and could see how grotesquely misshapen it was. Hermione gasped and tears came to her eyes as she quickly sprung up and said, "Oh Harry I'm so sorry I was just excited to see you."

Harry didn't bother to force a smile this time as he merely spoke between his now gritted teeth, "It's ok 'Mione but could we get this fixed?"

Hermione quickly helped Harry to his feet by grasping on his good hand and arm and she pulled her wand out. She softly uttered a healing charm and Harry watched his bone mend. It was rather painful but no worse than leaving it in its broken state. Hermione had a truly stricken expression on her face as she finished mending his wrist. She looked at him and said, "Harry I am so sorry I didn't even think that you might brace yourself when you fell."

Harry smiled as he gingerly flexed his newly healed wrist before he said, "It's ok Hermione you fixed me up. I assure you at this point I can handle my share of pain ok?" Hermione nodded hesitantly before Harry smiled and said, "Good now show me where I need to put my trunk and Hedwig's cage. She is here isn't she?" Hermione nodded

and took Harry by his newly healed right hand and led him up the stairs to a nice guest bedroom.

Harry began to unpack his suitcase before he noticed Hermione staring at him strangely. Harry arched his eyebrow and said, "Is there something you see you like?"

Hermione blushed and said, "You just look so different with nice clothes is all."

Harry frowned and said, "Different good, or different bad?"

Hermione smiled and said, "Different good Harry."

Harry nodded as he finished taking care of his clothes before he pulled Hermione into a hug of his own. Harry murmured in her ear, "I've wanted to do that for the last 3 weeks. I can honestly say you would look good wearing a burlap bag 'Mione."

Hermione smiled and pecked Harry on the cheek before she stood back away from Harry and said, "Ok I want to see it."

Harry arched his eyebrow and said, "You want to see what Hermione?"

Hermione snorted and said, "I want to see your form silly." Upon seeing Harry's devious expression she indignantly said, "Oh get your mind out of the gutter Potter."

Harry made a crooked smile and said, "Are you sure that's what you want to see?"

Hermione shook her head firmly and said, "I'm warning you Harry, you might never get *that* chance if you don't show me your form."

Harry put his hands up in mock surrender before he said, "Ok, Ok I'll show you but you have to turn around. Just count to ten and you can see my form."

Hermione began counting aloud, "10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1" Hermione turned around and saw a large coyote staring at her intently with the

largest emerald eyes she had ever seen. Harry walked over to Hermione and licked her face before he pawed at her playfully. Hermione rubbed him behind his ears and on his belly and laughed as Harry's eyes became half lidded and he couldn't control his back right leg from twitching uncontrollably.

Harry eventually stepped away and transformed back as Hermione watched Harry shift from a coyote to his human form effortlessly. Hermione watched the entire thing with rapt fascination before she said, "Harry that was amazing. Your form is so pretty."

Harry smiled and said, "Thank you, and now you can call me a dog and mean it as a term of endearment."

Hermione chuckled and said, "I suppose so Harry, but you'll never be a dog in how you act. Anyways, when can I do the training?"

Harry smiled and replied, "Well we can either squeeze it in during August and have it cut deeply into our revisions that we had planned for then. Or, we can try to do it during school and work ahead on our assignments in August. I will leave it up to you."

Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment before she said, "Let's do it in August. We can just spend some extra time in the library when were not in class or Quidditch practice to keep up on our revisions."

Harry suddenly realized that he would have to make wise use of his time this year and frowned. Hermione noticed Harry's frown and asked, "Is everything alright Harry?"

Harry sighed and said, "Yes, it's just that we won't have any time to do fun stuff like Hogsmeade trips and walks around the lake like last year."

Hermione smiled softly and said, "Harry of course we will. As long as we stick to our study schedule I promise we will have plenty of time to do other things."

Eventually, Harry and Hermione went back downstairs and found David and Elizabeth Granger waiting for them with large smiles on their faces. Elizabeth smiled and said, "Hey you two. We were

beginning to wonder if you would ever come down after all of the laughing we heard up there. Did it have anything to do with Harry's animagus form?"

Hermione smiled and replied in standard Hermione form, "Mom it's *animagus* and yes Harry showed me his form. I don't think he'd mind showing you both would he *Harry*?"

Before she could turn around to glance at Harry her parents both gasped in glee and clapped as the brown and grey coyote walked over to them and let her parents pet him. Elizabeth cooed about how soft he was and how green his eyes were and David was just too much in awe to do anything but pet Harry. Eventually Harry transformed back and he was smiling proudly before Hermione wrapped him into a big hug.

David finally spoke and said, "So Harry, how long did it take you to learn that?"

Harry smiled and said, "Well it took me 3 full weeks of 12 hour days to learn it. In fact I plan on teaching it to Hermione when we get a chance this August at my house."

They chatted for awhile as Harry discussed how his 1st 3 weeks of the summer had been so much fun and how he had learned a lot about his parents from Sirius and Remus. Harry described the Black Archival library to which Hermione's eyes lit up before Harry told her that her room connected to the library and that she could decorate it anyway she wanted like Harry had. Hermione pounced on Harry and kissed his face repeatedly while her parents watched in surprise at how outgoing their normally reserved daughter was acting with Harry.

The entire week at the Grangers was an enlightening experience for both Harry and Hermione's parents. David and Elizabeth immediately took a liking to Harry's calm and casual charm that he often displayed around the house. Harry cooked a few meals over the course of the week which were met with compliments. They only ate inside a few times because they typically went out to a nice restaurant. Hermione was extremely appreciative of Harry's new wardrobe and made a point to show her appreciation with many stolen snogs in the various nooks and crannies of the Grangers household.

Harry was also introduced to several board games including Risk which Harry and David kept a single game going for the balance of the week. Harry found David's personality was very similar to his own and the both found they enjoyed each other's company a lot. Harry also learned how to play Monopoly and several different card games including a game called Euchre.

Hermione was ecstatic about how well her parents took to Harry but she wasn't really surprised because as she told Harry less than a year earlier, anyone who ever got a chance to know him would have a hard time not falling in love with him. Hermione also was caught up on the general business of the order as Dumbledore had instructed Harry. Harry also told Hermione the contents of the prophecy to which Hermione tearfully hugged Harry more for her own comfort than for Harry's.

Harry broke the hug and looked Hermione straight in the eyes and said, "I know that prophecies and divination are both fairly vague arts. However, I've come to realize that my parents were murdered because of this prophecy and that in and of itself will make me fulfill its contents. I have no intention of losing to him Hermione, because I have far too much to live for. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

Hermione nodded tearfully and said, "Oh Harry I know that this is something you have to do. I promise that I'll help you along the way and that you won't lose yourself on your quest ok love?" Harry merely smiled as they hugged and just sat together with Hermione in Harry's lap for a long time just soaking in the warmth and love of each other.

It was finally time for Harry to return to Black Manor at the end of the week but as a treat the night before he was to return, David and Elizabeth decided to take Harry and Hermione out for a walk and dinner at a small café down the road from their house. They were enjoying a quiet and enjoyable meal when Harry felt the familiar cold feeling he associated with dementors. Harry glanced over at Hermione who had a strange glossed over expression on her face. Harry suddenly realized that with his Occlumency shields the monsters were probably very close in order for him to sense their presence. Harry looked up and saw that the monsters were merely 10

feet away so Harry did the only thing he could as he pulled out his wand. As he was about to cast his patronus he heard someone scream, "Stop Harry."

Harry turned around to see Remus Lupin throw off an invisibility cloak and cast his patronus at the monsters. His corporeal wolf chased the two hooded monsters back into the skies and away from the café. Eventually all of the patrons returned to normal as Harry and Remus gave them all small bits of chocolate. After everything was back to normal with a few *obliviate* spells, Harry turned to Remus and asked, "Moony why were you here under an invisibility cloak?"

Remus sighed and waved his arms and soon two other witches Harry recognized as Emmeline Vance and Professor McGonagall pulled off invisibility cloaks in empty tables around where Harry and the Grangers had been sitting in the now empty cafe. They all left the café and returned to the Granger's household where they gathered in the living room.

Remus eventually said to the group, "Harry, Albus only informed you of one of the purposes of the order. The other purpose of the order is to provide you with an active bodyguard supplement because he is aware that many people have much to gain if you are killed or manipulated. First and foremost Voldemort has much to gain by killing the one wizard who has been known to have defeated him. Next, despite public opinion to the contrary there are several in the ministry who believe that with your celebrity you wield too much power and sway over public opinion. I have no doubts the ministry sent the dementors today in an attempt to provoke your usage of magic in front of muggles. Since you don't know how to use a meory charm you would have been charged with practicing magic in front of non-magical people which violated the statute of secrecy. However, I doubt the minister thought that you would have a bodyguard contingent watching your every move. You would have surely been given a token trial and with threat of having your wand snapped they would have offered you freedom if you accepted a role as a ministry supporter. I have heard many similar stories of such ministry behavior in the past. In fact, Sirius lost his job as an auror because he refused to be a token head for Barty Crouch Sr.'s reforms and agenda. Albus feared such a plot against you and apparently his fears were founded.

What I want to know is how you were unaffected by the dementors until they got 10 feet away?"

Harry shrugged and said, "Occlumency training."

Remus' eyes grew large and said, "Harry most of the order is proficient in Occlumency and the dementors affect us just the same as the typical witch or wizard. Do you mind if I inform Albus of this development?"

Harry shook his head and said, "If you don't mind telling him also that I want to be informed when I am being followed. I don't care if he chooses to do it but just that he felt he had to keep it a secret from me. He needs to be aware that keeping secrets from me will do nothing but drive a wedge between us." Remus nodded solemnly. Emmeline smiled and waved at Harry and said, "See you at the next meeting Harry" before she took the FLOO back to Grimmauld.

Professor McGonagall approached Harry and Hermione and warmly said, "Your class selection lists and book lists should be arriving around the beginning of August along with a couple of other surprises. Take care of yourself Harry, Hermione." The elderly witch also left through the FLOO before Remus smiled and waved at everyone and made his exit through the FLOO as well.

Hermione was smiling as the order members left before she turned to Harry and said, "Oh Harry don't you see what Professor McGonagall was trying to tell us?" Harry shook his head and Hermione rolled her eyes before she continued, "She was telling us we would be Prefects next year without actually saying it." Harry nodded with understanding even though he secretly wondered how someone could get so much information from such a few words.

That night as Harry attempted to sleep in his bed his last night at the Grangers his mind was swamped with all of the potential implications of what Remus had told him earlier that night. Harry realized that he would need to keep an eye out for the ministry along with Voldemort and his supporters. Harry suddenly felt like the war would be a lot more difficult than he had ever thought possible.

A/N: Please Review and tell me what you think of the chapter.
Thanks for reading and reviewing.

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Chapter 13

Harry's week at the Granger's was an extremely relaxing and needed diversion from the rest of his summer. Harry was happy he had finished his animagus training and was looking forward to helping Hermione go through hers. However, the recent revelations that Dumbledore had seen it fit to have him followed without his permission and withholding his beliefs about the ministry which while founded would have been extremely nice to have knowledge of before he pulled his wand against some dementors. There had been too many secrets and Harry was beginning to grow tired of Dumbledore's methods.

Harry returned to Black Manor with a lot on his mind and he knew that it wouldn't be resolved until the order meeting that night. Harry spent some time in the dueling room running and trying to take his mind off of his problems without constantly using his Occlumency as crutch. Harry had grown a couple of inches in the month since the end of the term. Harry was now around his father's height at the same age thanks to a well rounded diet at Hogwarts and now for once he ate well during the summer thanks to Dobby and Winky.

Finally, the order meeting was to begin soon in the parlor room. Harry had grabbed a book on shield conjuring and was sitting in his usual seat waiting for the other members to pour in. Harry knew that he had several issues to bring forth at the meeting but he would wait until the time was appropriate before he spoke. Harry had made many new and interesting friends in the order as Harry found many of the personalities refreshing.

Harry was 1st joined by Tonks who greeted Harry with a cheerful, "Wotcher Harry. I heard what happened last night with the Grangers. I guess we all have some explaining to do eh?"

Harry merely nodded as his eyes betrayed no emotion. Tonks shrank away a little at Harry's demeanor knowing how he was typically so warm and friendly. She could also understand why Harry would be upset with the order given that he had been followed without his knowledge and also plans were drawn in secret to protect him from

the ministry without giving him notice. Truthfully, she didn't care much for how Albus dealt with Harry. He treated Harry with an almost calculated and detached abandon which was quite different from how he dealt with everyone else.

Harry resumed his reading as the Diggory's entered the room. They waved and smiled at Harry who returned the gesture before he resumed his reading. They were amongst the few order members that weren't too interested in the dichotomy that had been set up with the groups. They made a point to tell everyone at their 1st meeting that they were only involved to help Harry and didn't care much for any political leanings that Dumbledore proposed. They took their seat in the middle of the room where they typically sat as Albus sat at one end surrounded by Moody and McGonagall, while Remus was surrounded by Sirius and Harry at the other end of the table.

Eventually, more members began to trickle into the room as Emmeline Vance who Harry had begun to call Emmy even though he was the only one granted the latitude to do so, took her seat next to Harry as she had grown accustomed to. She warmly said, "Hello Harry, I wanted to apologize for not telling you about the guard duty. Albus made a point to tell us that you weren't to know of our presence though."

Harry looked at her intently and asked, "Does he ask for a report of what I did while you were on duty?"

Emmy nodded tentatively before the puzzle began to form in her mind, "Oh you think he is spying on you don't you?"

Harry frowned and replied, "Well I refuse to dismiss the possibility given his reluctance to be open with me. Something tells me Albus and I are going to have it out tonight so we can put this all on the table. It's not really his place to withhold information about my life no matter how wise he *thinks* he is." Emmy nodded as Harry went back to his readings. Harry glanced over to Tonks and apologized quietly about not greeting her properly as he flashed the young auror a bright smile which in turn seemed to brighten her mood considerably.

Eventually Harry was joined by Remus and Sirius as the room was nearly filled aside from the purported leader of the group. Fawkes

then flashed in the room and made a sympathetic look at Harry before Albus arrived via portkey already in his seat.

Albus stood to address the group and even Harry could notice that the majority of the order members wouldn't look Harry in the eye. Harry found it comical and slightly sad that so many grown wizards were intimidated by a 14 year old wizard.

Albus called the meeting to order and they began on their rather full agenda for the evening. Harry had the good grace not to glare at the headmaster but he did shoot the old wizard several meaningful and not pleasant looks.

Remus began the meeting by briefing the order on the attack that had taken place at the café the previous night and how Harry had uncovered the fact that he was being followed unknowingly. Remus also made a short mention of how Harry was unaffected by the dementors until they got within 10 feet of him. Albus got a very thoughtful expression upon hearing the news but didn't speculate upon it.

McGonagall stood and explained that Sirius and Remus had contacted her earlier in the day after hearing of the ministry and its attempt to frame Harry. She discussed that she had filled out the requisite paperwork to register Harry as an animagus without giving away Harry's form. Minerva added with a smirk that Harry was registered as a dog with no distinguishing characteristics. Harry found his head of house and her description quite gratifying as he was now a legally registered animagus and yet only 5 people knew of his actual form. Several order members requested to see Harry's form but he denied and coldly said, "I prefer to keep some secrets from you as you all have apparently been doing with me." The joking and mirthful nature of the meeting was quickly lost as they all looked at the stone faced Harry.

Emmy stood up next and simply discussed that she had proposed creating Harry and Hermione 2nd wands because they were the only underage wizards with any knowledge of the order and therefore needed the protection a 2nd wand could provide. Harry gratefully accepted the offer with a smile from the one time apprentice of

Ollivander before she smiled and said, "Harry it's the least I can do for you."

The various ministry employees described the rumors circulating that included the ministers undersecretary would be taking the vacant DADA position as well as the high inquisitor position for the coming year. Harry vaguely remembered Hermione discussing such a position from Hogwarts a History, before Albus broke in and gravely said, "Yes it appears as though it may be a very difficult year at Hogwarts to be anything other than a ministry employee of pureblood." Everyone read between the lines at the vague words and understood the statement to be about Umbridge more than anything else.

Bill Weasley stood next and announced that preliminary discussions with the goblins had proven marginally successful and then shocked the group when he said, "The leaders of Gringott's have requested a private meeting with Harry to discuss his personal thoughts on the matter. Seeing that the last time such a request was made was in the times of the founding of Hogwarts so I accepted immediately upon Harry's behalf. Personally I think it has something to do with Harry's extensive holdings but I have also heard mention of how refreshing Harry's behavior has been with many of the employees."

Harry frowned upon the mention of his holdings when he realized that no one had ever told him anything about his parents having left him anything more than his vault. Harry stood and said, "Bill how is it that you know of the extent of my holdings when no one else has seen fit to mention it to me."

Remus and Sirius looked in shock at Harry before they glared at Albus who sighed and said, "I am aware it was my duty to inform Harry of his inheritance upon his 11th birthday but I thought it to be in the interest of the common good to keep Harry in the dark for fear he would want to be removed from his relatives care with the use of his resources."

Everyone was visibly upset now before Harry stood and said in a frightening whisper just loud enough for everyone to hear, "So, *Albus* you deemed the common good more important than the fact that I

lived in a bloody cupboard for 8 years of my life. I have never had any clothes that fit me until this summer and I was fortunate to get enough food to not go to bed hungry for the majority of my life. Please tell me how that fulfills the common good?"

Everyone paled at Harry's description of his life before Hogwarts before Albus simply said, "There was no better protection at the time for you and your life was more important than your happiness."

Harry gaped at the comment and sat down going into deep thought about his next course of action. The majority of the order was looking on in concern at Harry before Albus cleared his throat and motioned for the next order members report.

Severus stood and informed the order that Voldemort had yet to accept him back fully into his good graces. But, he had forgiven him for not showing up to his resurrection as a need to keep his cover as a spy. He described the Dark Lord's wish to have his hands on the prophecy to determine its full contents. He finished by adding that Voldemort had been unable to force any visions upon the Potter brat and was growing concerned that Harry was growing too powerful. He proposed Harry letting down his shields at night to not give the Dark Lord any advantage in terms of gauging Harry's ability. Once again an argument broke out amongst the group.

Albus stood and looked down the table at Harry before he softly said, "Harry, what do you believe would be the proper course of action?"

Harry arched his eyebrow and snorted before he stood and looked Albus in the eye. Harry softly replied, "Well I don't really see what advantage can be gained from having my sleeping hours flooded with these visions. My days already have their share of such thoughts. I refuse to weaken myself just because Voldemort might have some misconception about my powers or abilities."

Albus sighed and replied, "Yes Harry but if he determines you are strong now he might attack now."

Harry countered, "That might be true sir but in reality how strong is Voldemort now; surely not as strong as he will be next year. Would it

be such a terrible thing for an attack now, given the alternative of an army attacking Hogwarts next year?"

There were murmurs amongst the group before Albus resignedly said, "Yes Harry it appears as though you have a valid point. We will not ask you to do anything you do not wish to do yourself. I am afraid I have made that mistake far too many times at this point as indicted by your attitude towards me now." Harry nodded and took his seat as the majority of the order was looking at Albus with a certain measure of anger. The entire Kiddies table was looking at the old wizard with contempt and hate while Harry was looking on with a chilling calm.

The meeting was adjourned with promise of another in a few weeks. Most of the order members made a point to go up to Harry and apologize for keeping secrets from him and also to express their outrage at his treatment by the Dursleys and how Dumbledore had condoned it.

Harry decided to go up to the dueling room and run off his anger and frustration. He was eventually joined by Remus and Sirius who were both looking concernedly at Harry who had moved on from his running and moved on to some free weights. Remus spoke first, "Harry we were wondering why you never told Sirius or me why things were so bad at the Dursleys?"

Harry looked at them and replied, "Well this past summer wasn't too bad and I really couldn't tell you anything before then could I?"

Remus sighed and replied, "No Harry and I have to apologize for not being a part of your life during those years. I was aware of where you were but I foolishly thought you would recoil at the thought of a werewolf in your life."

Harry sighed and replied, "Remus you never gave me the choice. I don't blame you though. You've lived your entire life with prejudice so your beliefs were totally founded. It's too late to change the past now guys but that doesn't mean I am happy about it ok?"

They both nodded before Sirius said, "So would you like to know about the Potter estate?" Harry shrugged indifferently so Sirius replied, "I'll take that as a yes. We'll get you to Gringott's so you can

be properly informed of your inheritance and to levy a proper fine upon Albus. Goblins do not take kindly to such behavior so I have no doubt Albus will be having difficulties with the goblins from here on out."

Harry smiled slightly and said, "Good he deserves as much." Then his expression soured a little and he said, "I really don't want to talk any more about the Dursleys. Those days are over and I've made my peace with that. I really don't want to deal with others hang ups over something they don't understand."

Remus and Sirius nodded with understanding before they left the room. Harry worked out for a little while longer before getting a shower and then going to bed. Harry only hoped that better times were ahead.

The following week Harry tried to avoid everyone that was in the house as he spent countless hours split between the library as he worked ahead in History of Magic so he could nap in the class during the school year. He also spent a lot of time in the training room running and lifting weights. He would write Hermione every other day as he had promised and tell her of his school work he had completed and also his exercise routine. All Harry was doing over the 2 weeks was avoiding his problems and while it didn't solve anything it did give Harry time to think about how he could solve his problems.

The order had not held a meeting since the fateful night of Dumbledore's improprieties came to light. Dumbledore had spent the two weeks working feverishly on finding ways to make things better with Harry. He had remained detached from the boy for a long time. When Harry was born he was already aware that he or Neville Longbottom would be the child in the prophecy. Dumbledore watched as James and Lily Potter were forced into hiding and he was aware that Peter Pettigrew was the Potter's secret keeper. He had believed in Sirius' innocence but he had no means to grant Sirius a trial without compromising himself and so an innocent man went to Azkaban for 12 years.

Then after he had convinced himself repeatedly over 10 years that what he had done had been for Harry's benefit, it was time for Harry

to come to Hogwarts. He almost expected the young boy to be spiteful and petty due to his upbringing and yet he found that Harry was nothing like that. In fact, Harry was an engaging and shy little boy that stood up for his friends and refused to be taken advantage of. Truthfully, Albus found himself caring for the boy despite the fact that he had been given an apparent death sentence before he was even born. Then at the end of his first year, Harry miraculously defeated his possessed professor who had been attempting to resurrect Voldemort from within the walls of the very castle he was to protect.

The following year Harry's heroics extended to defeating another attempt to resurrect Voldemort through the use of a diary and a basilisk. Once again Harry had triumphed and beaten back against all odds.

Harry's third year once again proved to be a challenge as he had an escaped convict after him and dementors appeared to be after him as well. Then Harry with Hermione's help uncovered the truth of his parent's betrayal and his godfather's innocence. But, more importantly Harry's latent power was unleashed against the dementors and Albus believed for the first time that Harry was truly a child of destiny. Albus thought for the first time that Harry might have a chance in this after all.

The past year had been exceptionally difficult to watch as Harry had finally found the emotional support he had needed since he was placed with the Dursleys in the form of Sirius and Hermione. It had been a difficult year for Harry that included several hospital wing visits but Harry finally had shown that he understood his importance in the wizarding world. It was not something he embraced, but rather accepted, and his performance in the tri-wizard tournament showed that. Yet Harry also showed his will to be strong enough to deal with the more unpleasant parts of tragedy. He had bounced back from the traumatic experience following the third task in a short time and had even handled the news well when he was told of the prophecy. But, now when it was time to make the sacrifices to win the war Harry was acting as though he no longer valued Albus' advice as all knowing and this served as a source of worry.

Albus knew he had to move Harry towards his thinking or the order would remain divided and it could not stand divided. He decided he would give Harry full disclosure in order to regain his trust and hoped they could start a relationship that could still help to win the war.

Finally, the day before Harry's birthday had come and Harry's scar had been uncharacteristically sore all day. He had mentioned this to Sirius and Remus who mentioned to Harry to tell them if it flared up any more than it already had. Around 6 pm Harry's scar flared up in pain as they were eating dinner and Harry ground out "Burrow" before he passed out. Sirius had Dobby take care of Harry while he and Remus were gone, as they both apparated to the burrow to find the Weasley house in the midst of a fire fight between the family and a dozen deatheaters.

Remus and Sirius effortlessly fought their way to the house together and were able to drive the deatheaters away before they checked to see if everyone was alright. Everyone in the family appeared to be shaken but Molly who was in hysterics seemed to have taken it worse than anyone else. Molly repeatedly mumbled something along the lines of "I thought we were safe here."

Dumbledore finally arrived along with Moody and after a brief discussion it was decided that the Weasleys would spend the remainder of the summer at Black Manor even though Sirius and Remus were concerned about Ron's presence and how it would affect Harry in the day to day interactions in the household. The Weasleys were initially overjoyed to be spending time with Harry to make sure he was ok after the events at the end of the term. Molly and Arthur were both well aware of how Harry's summer was going but the youngest Weasley siblings were still in the dark as Harry hadn't written Ron or Ginny any letters and had sent only one to the twins who stubbornly refused to divulge its contents.

Therefore it came as a surprise when Sirius forcefully said to the Weasleys, "I want you all to know that Harry has had a very busy and difficult summer. I am aware of certain members of your family that have had some difficulties with Harry and my relationship in the past." Sirius glanced to Molly whose face was red with indignation before he continued, "I am also aware of those in the family that seem to think

Harry has everything in the world and therefore should be jealous of him. We have become aware of Harry's treatment at the hand of the relatives that *Albus* placed him with. Harry has lived anything but an enviable life, so don't bother him. I assure you if anyone makes Harry's life more difficult than it is already, then I will kick your entire family out on the street. As it is you will all be putting a serious crimp into the quiet business we have become accustomed to in our home. Do not bug Harry, because I warn you, not a single one of you will like the consequences."

Meanwhile at Black Manor Harry had regained his consciousness minutes after the scar flared in pain and after Dobby forced him to take some pepper-up potion he went to the library to read about curse scars like the one he had gotten from Voldemort. It came as a great surprise to Harry when he read everything on the subject and could find no similar circumstances of transferred power or the visions that he had grown accustomed to with the scar.

Harry continued to thumb his way through several dark magic books trying to find a solution to his problem until Harry had taken the task of reading a book on dark rituals. As Harry thumbed through the book he came across a chapter on something called a horcrux. The persistent voice that Harry had heard so much during his 4th year returned with a vengeance and forcefully said, "Read this page."

Harry finished reading the page and had become rather upset when he had finished reading. It had perfectly described his condition in the section regarding the effect of a Horcrux on a living person. It also described certain rituals to remove such a Horcrux and Harry intended on doing so, sooner than later and would not tell anyone of the process aside from Hermione. Harry was all but certain that Dumbledore was aware of the fact and had withheld another life altering fact from him. The way the old man had casually described how Voldemort has transferred his parselmouth abilities through the curse scar should have been a dead give away especially to the wizard who knew the most about Voldemort. Harry chalked up another reason to not trust the headmaster and went downstairs when he heard several familiar voices breaking the serene quiet of Black Manor.

A/N: Please review. Next chapter we get to deal with an order meeting and the Weasley's in Grimmauld. Also Harry has his birthday party and Hermione arrives. Keep reading and reviewing, thanks.

Chapter 15

Harry slowly made his way down the stairs to where the voices were coming from even though Harry was certain who the voices belonged to. Sure enough Harry made his way around the corner and saw a sea of red hair. He was immediately spotted by Mrs. Weasley who wrapped him up into a tight hug that Harry found to be rather smothering. Mrs. Weasley broke the hug and said, "Harry, dear it's good to see you've filled out this summer. I am just happy you are away from those dreadful muggles after everything you said about them."

Harry glared at Molly for a moment before he said, "Mrs. Weasley what I say behind closed doors has a place, just there, behind closed doors."

Molly appeared stricken before she remembered Sirius' words and she calmly said, "I apologize Harry, I just worry about you so much sometimes."

Harry softened a little before he said, "I appreciate that, but you are not and never will be my mother. Voldemort saw to it that my mum couldn't be here. So let's leave the whole parent discussion at that and not bring it up again."

The rest of the Weasleys watched the conversation with trepidation as Harry in not so many words told Molly to stop smothering him with her misplaced maternality. The line had been drawn by Harry, and now time would tell if Molly could keep herself in check.

Harry glanced at the rest of the Weasleys except for Ron who Harry skipped over for obvious reasons. He smiled and waved at the twins and gave courteous nods towards Mr. Weasley and Ginny. Harry looked around and said, "So I take it Albus has sent you as refugees here?"

Arthur nodded and replied, "Yes, Sirius indicated you have some guest rooms for such an occasion."

Harry nodded and said, "Yes we have 5 rooms that you can divide up any way you see fit amongst the 6 of you. Just a couple of ground rules, first no one insults Dobby or Winky or you leave the house. Second, no one enters the dueling room or library without my or Sirius' consent. Finally, if you have any emotional baggage, leave it at the door or leave now." Harry glared at Ron after he said this and then led the slightly stricken Weasley family who aside from the twins were not in Harry's good graces. Harry wasn't exactly angry with Ginny but he didn't really feel comfortable around her either.

Harry helped them to their rooms and left to go back downstairs and talk to Remus and Sirius. Harry found the pair in a heated discussion with Dumbledore and Moody in the kitchen. Harry walked in and simply said, "Sirius, I helped the Weasleys to their rooms. I'll be in the library researching curse scars if you need me." Harry glanced at Dumbledore who much to Harry's delight paled at the mention before Harry turned and left the room.

In truth Harry had no intention of researching anything at that point but he viewed the opportunity with Dumbledore there too good to pass up. Actually, Harry had found the day to be rather exhausting so after he jogged a mile he went to his room, got a shower, and then he went to bed knowing the next day would be his fifteenth birthday.

Harry awoke at his now customary 6 am to go for a run in the dueling room. Harry's previous two weeks had gotten him into the best shape of his life and he actually began to look forward to his morning runs as a time of thought and contemplation. When Harry arrived in the room however he found an intruder into his quiet time as Ron and Ginny were snooping around the room as though they owned the place. Harry had the fortune of opening the door quietly so he manufactured his wand and cast *petrificus totalus* a couple of times, and before the ginger pair knew what had hit them they were frozen in place on the ground.

Harry turned the pair over and had a menacing if not malicious look in his eyes when he coldly said, "I see it took the two of you a grand total of 8 hours to break one of the ground rules set forth. Do you have an explanation for your presence in this room given it is clearly identified by the sign outside the room?"

Harry cancelled the spells and took a seat in a chair he conjured before he motioned them to speak. Ginny spoke as she said, "We're sorry we were just curious as to the rooms of the house."

Harry shook his head and said, "I'm sorry you'll have to come up with a better excuse than that."

Ron spoke and said, "We were just trying to find a reason why you haven't written us this summer and also when we got here you were rude to mum."

Harry glared at the dim redhead before he said, "First, Ronald I can't think of a good reason to write to such a child as you. Second, your mother spouted her mouth off on information I divulged that I deem sensitive in the presence of several I never would have deemed worthy of hearing it."

They both gaped at Harry before Ginny quietly said, "Harry what's happened to you?"

Harry sadly looked at the two he had considered friends less than a year earlier when he sadly said, "I was forced to grow up. I am giving both of you a choice I didn't have, enjoy your childhood while you can. If you leave this room and the library alone you can explore the house. I just want to have 3 rooms to myself in this house. My room, the dueling room, and the library, is that asking too much?"

They both shook their heads afraid their words would fail them at the moment as they scurried out of the room. Harry put his head in his hands and took some deep breaths before he stood banished the chair and started his morning run in the blissful peace he had sought. After Harry had finished his morning run which had him feeling a lot better about the Weasley situation now that he had dealt with Ron and Ginny earlier.

He took a nice long shower and styled his hair for the special occasion. Harry looked at himself in the mirror content with his hair and generally pleased by how fit he looked. He was by no means heavy and in fact he could accurately be described as wiry. But Harry was no pushover as he had added a fair amount of muscle to his frame in the two short weeks of intensive exercise he had undertaken.

He felt stronger and more energetic and Harry savored the feeling. He dressed in a pair of khaki shorts and a nice polo shirt before he made his way downstairs to enjoy a companionable breakfast with those brave souls awake so early.

Harry found Remus, Sirius, Molly, Ron, and Ginny at the table. Everyone glanced at him as he came into the room and he was waiting for someone to tell him good morning when he was instead greeted with the undeniable contact of Molly Weasley's hand on his face. Momentarily staggered he righted himself and looked at the fiery haired woman and dangerously whispered, "Who the bloody hell do you think you are?"

Molly staggered backwards at Harry's tone before she gathered her resolve and said, "How dare you hex my children this morning when we have taken you in before and treated you as our own."

Harry's resolve wasn't weakened by the attack as he merely said, "Molly I set some simple ground rules last night and Ronald and Ginevra broke them within 8 hours of their arrival. Would you like to be out on the street as I am sure Sirius already threatened you with this morning. I am quite sure a family of redheads wouldn't be terribly hard target practice for the death eaters."

Molly gaped and words escaped her as Harry continued, "Molly I will only say this once. This house is far too small and my patience is far too frayed to deal with your controlling behavior. Sirius took you into his house out of the goodness of his soul after you have done nothing more than criticize him for over a year. I very may well have been taken into your home, but I never asked for your kindness and I am quite sure if we started keeping count not a single one of you would be here now if I hadn't voiced my vision before I passed out. Have you ever been put under the cruciatus curse Mrs. Weasley?"

Molly weakly said, "No-no Harry I haven't."

Harry smiled grimly and said, "That is about a tenth of the pain that I feel compared to when my scar acts up. I managed to mention the name of your house as I was in this pain because I obviously care about you and your family's well being. Do not ever presume you know the full story until you have researched the facts. Both ickle

Ronniekins and Ginevra play you like a fiddle and you are none the wiser. Do you even know how much of a prat Ron was to Hermione and me this year? Ginny I am disappointed in because she understands as well as I do how much Ron has put us through over the years. Yet here we are first morning here and the dumb twins go snooping in one of the few rooms of the house that they were respectfully asked to stay out of. As far as I am concerned the only Weasley's that aren't persona non grata with me at the moment are Fred, George, Charlie, and Bill. If I hear a peep out of any of you the next month I will not hesitate to put you in your place. Now you've been warned, don't try my patience. Oh and by the way thanks for the birthday present." Harry motioned at the burning red imprint that Molly had left on his face before he stormed out of the room and up to the library.

As soon as Harry left the room Sirius stood and quietly said, "Harry has now been directly or indirectly accosted by your family two times in the last 2 hours. Consider yourselves uninvited from his birthday party today. If you do intend on staying in my and Harry's home you will refrain from doing anything else for the next month."

Sirius called on Winky and asked her to get Harry some breakfast. The little elf disappeared with a pop as the three Weasleys who sat at the table sat with stunned expressions on their own faces. It had not been the start to the day that any of them had wanted.

Harry was not particularly angry with Mrs. Weasley now that he had gotten his discussion with her out of the way and he really only had to talk to Mr. Weasley to air out the rest of his Weasley laundry. Harry had actually found the morning to be very cleansing and simply shook his head as he finished his History of Magic assignment. He glanced over at the stack of rolled up papers he had accumulated over the previous two weeks searching for an important document especially for Hermione. He had drawn up a schedule for Hermione's animagus training after Remus and Sirius had both agreed that Harry's knowledge was extensive enough to train her himself.

Around 10 am Harry had finished his last assignments for the day and was determined to enjoy himself for the remainder of the day. Harry went down into the living room to wait for Hermione and her

parents' arrival which was to occur at 11 am. He glanced out of the corner of his eye and saw Ron and Ginny playing wizard's chess in the opposite corner of the room. He had plopped down in the old arm chair he had grown fond of reading in over the course of the summer and he settled in with the same book on shield conjuring that he had been reading over two weeks ago when everything had begun to snowball. He had practiced his shields in the dueling room and was actually quite happy with his progress on his shields which would come in very handy the next time he met deatheaters because at this point it wasn't a question of if, but merely when it would occur.

Finally, Hermione and her parents followed tumbling out of the fireplace as Harry deftly caught Hermione from falling and helped the other two Grangers up. David and Elizabeth had very amused expressions on their faces as Harry explained that the same happened to him nearly every time too. Hermione had been swamped by Ron and Ginny obviously wanting to tell their side of the story from earlier in the day to which Harry shrugged and showed her parents to the parlor room where they were holding the party.

Hermione had listened to Ron and Ginny's recounting of the horror story where Harry had petrified them for stumbling into the wrong room. Hermione rolled her eyes at the pair certain there was much more to the story and smiled as she watched Harry lead her smiling parents out of the room. She was immensely pleased that Harry and her parents got along so well and in fact her father hadn't stopped talking about getting a rematch with Harry in that silly board game they had played for a week cemented her suspicions. Her mother on the other hand was very pleased at how gentle and sweet Harry was and told her daughter to hold onto him because men like Harry didn't come along everyday; a fact that Hermione was only too aware of.

Harry returned to the living room and rescued Hermione from Ron and Ginny before he gave each a very stern look causing the two redheads to return to the other corner of the room and their chess game. Harry explained the happenings of the previous night and this morning fully and Hermione could only sympathize with having the Weasleys forced onto him. In fact, Harry only had kind words for the twins with whom Harry said he was working with on a big project and wouldn't elaborate further. Hermione was very impressed with Black

Manor as Harry gave her a tour and showed her where her room would be for the next month. She was pleased that she could decorate her own room and that she would have ready access to the library. Harry surprised her when he motioned over to his pile of History of Magic assignments he had completed in order to stockpile nap time while Binn's droned on. He also showed her the animagus training schedule that was very full but Harry managed to sneak in some revision work each day so that they would at least have a little head start on the lengthy process before term started.

Harry continued the tour and showed her his other two safe havens in the household as he showed her the dueling room and demonstrated his shield conjuring he had mastered which impressed Hermione greatly and elicited some jealousy that Harry had been doing so much learning during the summer compared to her.

Harry finally led Hermione to his room and she was impressed with how little he had done with the room and yet how it had a homey feel to it thanks to the colors and bookcases full of his previous year spell books and a few books he had confiscated from the Black family library.

Eventually they returned to the parlor room that had filled up with guests for the party. Harry was ushered into a seat at the head of the table as presents and cake were handed out. Harry got sweets from the majority of the people. Harry received his certificate for a new wand from Emmy and quietly handed Hermione her certificate which was met with a hug and a squeal. Harry got a foe glass from Moody who looked at Harry as an apprentice of sorts due to his accomplishments the night of the third task and wanted Harry to adopt CONSTANT VIGILANCE as his mantra. Remus and Sirius had gone together and gotten Harry the best magical contacts galleons could buy. A present that Hermione appreciated very much once Harry placed them in his eyes. Gone was the scrawny 11 year old boy that she had met on the train all those years ago. He had been replaced by in Hermione's opinion, a very handsome young man with the dreamiest green eyes she had ever seen.

Finally, Albus handed Harry a small package. Hermione noticed the look Harry was giving the headmaster and elected to figure it out later.

Harry opened the small parcel and found a diary. On the cover it read *Diary of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore 1945*. Harry stared at the old book intently for a moment before he realized that 1945 was the year that Dumbledore had defeated Grindewald. Albus realizing Harry's train of thought said, "Harry this is an enchanted diary but much different then that of Tom's. I have placed memories within these pages so that the reader may experience the full experience of a war I was destined to finish. I believe it may help you understand and forgive some of a foolish old man's mistakes in times such as these."

Harry sat in deep thought for a moment before he stood and gave his aging headmaster a firm and loving hug before he said, "Thank you sir. I know this will help me deal with some of this stuff better than I have been."

Dumbledore shook his head and replied, "My boy I was nearly 90 years older than you when I faced my destiny. You have done a remarkable job and all you have asked for in return is honesty and loyalty. That is a defining characteristic of leadership; do not view it as a weakness. You have many strengths Harry and I wish to help you discover many more before this is over. I am very proud of the man you are becoming."

Soon Harry was down to his last present and it was from Hermione. It was a small box wrapped in paper with little moving snitches on it. Harry smiled warmly at Hermione before he gently unwrapped the paper from the box in order to save it. There was a small box which Harry opened to find a brilliant new watch on it. Hermione grabbed the watch from its box and said, "Harry this is a magical watch which appears to be normal but if you push the proper button, it flips and shows a miniature version of the clock that the Weasleys own. Right now it has hands for me and Sirius. You can add more hands whenever you want by simply tapping the face with your wand while you concentrate in a person." Harry smiled and simply kissed Hermione right off her feet and on to his lap. It was the longest kiss they had ever shared and it took Remus clearing his throat to break the couple apart. They were both flushed but sporting very large grins.

After the party had ended Harry took all of his presents up to his room, quite pleased with how well his first birthday party had went. Harry kept the diary remembering his secret hiding place in the library where he could read it and not have to worry about prying eyes. Harry then went and watched Hermione and her parents look at the rooms that had been prepared for them in case they needed them. David and Elizabeth made their final farewells and shared hugs with both Harry and Hermione before the latter dragged her boyfriend back up the stairs to help her work on her room.

By the time they were finished Hermione was so pleased with the result she asked Harry if he wanted to see how good her bed was for snogging. Oh yes, Harry had a good birthday.

A/N: Please Review. To explain Harry's behavior towards the Weasleys, it is a combination of Ron's issues over the course of the year, Molly's constant mothering to everyone, and Ginny...well she just got caught snooping when expressly asked not to. Keep reading and reviewing. Also I am open to suggestions to Hermione's animagus form, clever suggestions are welcome.

Chapter 15

The day after Harry's birthday started like many previous days had with Harry climbing out of bed at 6 am and running a few miles before he got a shower and joined the early risers for breakfast. Harry came down the stairs and spotted Hermione in a conversation with Winky about something. They both glanced up at Harry's arrival and smiled and waved to him. Winky had shown dramatic improvement in the short time she had been at Black Manor and it showed in her interaction with Harry and Hermione. Harry took his seat and said, "So ladies. what are you talking about this morning?"

Hermione smiled and said, "I was talking to Winky about her contract and complimenting her on the work she has done here."

Harry nodded and hesitantly asked, "What do you think about her contract?"

Hermione smiled and placed her hands on top of Harry's as she said, "I think it is a more logical step to take then freeing all of the house elves with clothing. Perhaps we can change the charter of S.P.E.W. so we can work on getting more elves into similar bonding contracts." Harry nodded gratefully as they started chatting about what he had learned thus far in the summer.

Eventually Molly came down the stairs and took a seat next to Harry and Hermione. She softly said to the couple, "I just wanted to apologize for my family's behavior since our arrival. I do care for you and Hermione greatly because you have both been so good to Ron and Ginny. I am sorry if that comes across as a bit smothering but I will do my best to tone that down."

Harry smiled and looked Molly in the eye before he said, "Like I said yesterday, I do care for your family a great deal. I have appreciated your family and its kindness immensely since I've met you. As long as you understand that I am not looking for a mother or someone to protect me from myself then I see no problem with you hugging me and treating me with kindness. I do love you and your family. Never forget that." Harry stood and gave Molly a tight hug before he looked towards Hermione and said, "Well Hermione, are you ready to start

our work for the summer?" Molly looked extremely happy and relieved at Harry's words of reconciliation and had the beginnings of tears pooling in her eyes.

Hermione stood from her seat and also gave Molly a hug before she took Harry's offered hand and they made their way up to the Black family library to start Hermione's animagus training. Hermione had not been idle in her studies over the summer either, but she had kept her work to the 1st assignments for the coming term.

Harry began, "Ok 'Mione in order to successfully become an animagus you first need to master the transformation of your body. I know human transfiguration is a tricky skill to learn so you will start on your fingers and work your way up from there."

Hermione worked as she lengthened and shortened each of her fingers using transfiguration. After three hours of exhaustive practice during which Harry supervised and worked on his readings for History of Magic after he had finished all of the announced assignments for the coming term. Harry was pleased with Hermione's progress and made sure to reward her with a quick kiss on the lips before the pair went downstairs for some lunch.

Upon their arrival to the dining room they were surprised to find the entire Weasley family minus Percy sitting at the table in the midst of a very serious conversation. Harry and Hermione smiled and waved at the entire delegation of Weasleys, which were tentatively returned in kind by everyone including Ron. Harry asked, "Is everything ok with you guys?"

Harry didn't notice but Ginny was eyeing him up in a very predatory way obviously appreciative of his new look without glasses. Fortunately, Hermione was watching and made a mental note to warn Harry about the young witch and to keep an eye out for her also.

Arthur sighed and replied, "We were just having a family discussion on what our family's role in the coming war should be."

Harry nodded and replied, "Yes I am sure you all have a lot to discuss. Would you prefer Hermione and I have lunch elsewhere?"

Molly replied, "No dear you both are fine, in fact we were about to have some ourselves."

Harry smiled and said, "Dobby, Winky would you please make a small lunch for all of us?"

As they waited for the food to come Ginny sashayed her way over to Harry before she batted her eyes and said, "Harry I just wanted to say that you look really nice without your glasses on."

Harry smiled and then arched an eyebrow before he said, "Um, thanks Ginny. Does that mean I was ugly when I had glasses?"

Ginny looked very flustered as Hermione had to stifle a laugh before the redhead replied, "N-No Harry that wasn't what I meant at all."

Harry still skeptical asked, "Then why haven't you ever said anything about how I looked before?"

Hermione faked a cough to disguise her amusement before Ginny said, "I guess I never really thought you did look that good then." Harry's face suddenly turned cold before Ginny tried to save her arse and said, "I mean you did but I um oh never mind." Ginny stormed away from Harry and sat back down in her seat with a huff.

Harry turned to Hermione and quietly asked, "Hermione was Ginny trying to flirt with me there?"

Hermione was still giggling as she whispered into his ear, "Yes Harry but you totally flustered her when you caught on to her."

Harry winked at Hermione and said, "You do know that as long as am I with you I could care less what other girls think, don't you?" Hermione smiled and nodded before she gave Harry a brief kiss on the lips as Ginny scowled at the other end of the table.

Minutes later, the group was enjoying their sandwiches and potato soup as they shared some small talk about the coming year. Suddenly, the floo flashed and Professor McGonagall tumbled out carrying a handful of envelopes. She smiled as she walked towards the table handing Harry and Hermione their envelopes before moving

on to the Weasleys. Inside the envelopes were the class selection lists for the year as well as book lists and the mention of a school dance for Valentine's Day to which Harry smiled at Hermione who winked back.

McGonagall had returned to Harry and Hermione after handing out the Weasleys letters. She was smiling broadly as she manufactured a pair of bright red badges with P's in the center of them and two small rule books that simply said on the cover ground rules and by-laws of Hogwarts. She got close enough to the pair to whisper, "Congratulations to the both of you. I am quite sure you will make the two best prefects in the school and if you both continue at your current track those will have H's on your badges in a couple of years."

Then she stood back and loudly said, "Mr. Potter I was wondering if you would be interested in the Quidditch captain position?"

Harry sighed and sadly said, "I'm sorry Professor but with Prefect duties and OWL year studies I am afraid I can't take on any more responsibilities. I'll barely be able to find time for Quidditch practice ma'am. Thank you for the generous offer though. Might I suggest Katie Bell for the position?"

McGonagall smiled proudly and said, "Mr. Potter your behavior and responsible decisions still surprise me even now. Especially after all you put me through the first three years of your schooling. But it appears now you truly have turned over a new leaf. I am quite sure Ms. Bell will be quite pleased with her new position." With a smile and a nod from Harry and Hermione Professor McGonagall exited back through the floo.

Hermione squealed and gave Harry a tight hug and sweet kiss on the lips before they heard someone clear their throat. They broke apart to see Sirius and Remus staring at the badge in Harry's hand. Remus was first to speak and said, "Ah very good Harry. I was a prefect myself for Gryffindor. In fact Hermione, Lily was the female prefect for our year so it is good to see that you are upholding the proud tradition with Harry."

Sirius however whined and said, "Oh come off it Remus now they won't be able to have any fun because they will be upholding the rules."

Harry laughed and said, "Don't worry Sirius I know of a few things we can still do." Harry chanced a glance at the twins who were smirking before he caught Ron's expression out of the corner of his eyes. Ron was a fine shade of red which indicated he was bursting to say something.

Finally, Ron broke down and wailed, "Bloody hell Harry, how could you turn down Quidditch captain? I mean Katie is good but she is a girl."

Hermione and Ginny scowled at the insinuation before Harry stepped in and said, "Ron if it makes you so angry work hard and make the team this year and maybe you'll be captain next year. As it is, I think Katie is the best one for the job this year anyways. Also, I really don't have any desire for the position and I really don't plan on having the time the next 3 years to shoulder that responsibility. So, don't worry about me taking the job and you can get it if you work hard for it."

The room was slightly speechless after Harry's statement as Hermione was beaming at him and kissed him rather thoroughly to show her appreciation, while Sirius was a combination of disbelieving and impressed joining the rest of the Weasleys in that category. Remus on the other hand, was sporting a look which could be described as highly amused.

Hermione convinced Sirius to allow the pair to tell her parents of the news by taking the floo over that evening. Hermione was convinced they would go out for dinner as a celebration for their positions while Harry was equally convinced that the order would be watching them per usual.

After lunch and after Hermione's excitement finally wore down they continued the process of transfiguration as Harry had Hermione transfigure her hand to cover it with fur, quills, and feathers. After they had finished the first day of training they cleaned up and went over to the Granger's household.

Harry and Hermione entered the Granger household undetected and caught David and Elizabeth in a slightly compromising position in the kitchen, Hermione could only shriek before she ran from the room like a banshee. Harry chuckled a little although he still had the good manners to blush before he said, "We, um had a surprise, and um and Hermione wanted to..."

Elizabeth smiled at Harry's discomfort and said, "It's ok Harry, why don't you go grab Hermione while David and I clean up our little mess here."

Harry rushed from the kitchen and found a crimson Hermione sitting on the couch in the living room in a sort of a daze. Harry shook her out of it with a hug before he said, "Hey, uh your parents said they would love to hear your surprise in a minute."

Hermione took a couple of deep breaths before she brightened and smiled at Harry. Hermione then said, "Silly, it not just my surprise, it's *our* surprise. My parents will be proud of you too."

Harry smiled and helped Hermione out of the couch. She gave Harry a warm hug and they twined their hands together and walked back into the kitchen. They found a much less disheveled David and Elizabeth waiting for them even though both were sporting evil smirks.

Hermione ignored her parents' expressions and softly said, "Mum, Dad our head of house stopped by today at lunch and informed us that both Harry and I have been named 5th year prefects."

David and Elizabeth both hopped out of their chairs and gave the pair tight hugs and even exchanged as Harry and David shared a hug as well. They broke apart and Elizabeth said, "Oh, we're so proud of both of you. This is definitely an occasion to celebrate. Where would you kids like to eat?"

Harry whispered something in Hermione's ear before she giggled (a sound which Harry loved to hear from her almost as much as he loved to snog her) and said, "How about the nice Italian restaurant you took us to earlier?" David and Elizabeth both nodded before Harry glanced at the clothes he was wearing and was relieved to see he had dressed somewhat formally. Hermione ran up to her room and

found a nice sundress to wear. They enjoyed a quiet meal as they chatted about prefect duties and Hermione's first day of animagus training. Harry took the opportunity to practice CONSTANT VIGILANCE as he was searching for signs of order members around the restaurant and at one point he could almost swear he saw a distortion like that of an invisibility cloak being crinkled before he lost it.

David and Elizabeth were quite proud of their Harry and Hermione's accomplishment and were very forward with the compliments for their daughter. Harry deferred the praise to Hermione because he felt he had been given his share over the years while Hermione had not been given enough. Harry saw an excellent opportunity to boost Hermione's confidence as he matched every compliment from her parents with one of his own about how beautiful she looked during the meal. Harry enjoyed the glow Hermione had when she felt proud of herself because for the longest time she had always viewed who she was as something not to be proud of. During the past year Harry had found that Hermione thrived when given praise which indicated that she had not been appreciated enough in the past and Harry renewed his vow to help her past the problem.

The days following Harry and Hermione's announcement as prefects included a less tense order meeting as Albus had mended some fences within the order. Dedalus Diggle a rather pompous looking but not pompous acting order member was the order's legal presence. The man was a highly skilled solicitor and worked the ministry back channels to keep the order off the ministry's radar for as long as possible.

Dedalus announced that it had been formalized that Umbridge had been appointed as High Inquisitor for the coming year and that the ministry had plans to bring forth several educational decrees against faculty and students. Bill also informed Harry that he had his meeting with the goblins at the end of August so Harry decided to kill two birds with one stone and also have an informal meeting about the Potter estate.

Other order business included the announcement that Hagrid would be gone for the first part of the year on a mission with Madame

Maxime trying to gain the giants as an ally. Remus also indicated he would be gone trying to swing some of the werewolves over to the side of the order as well.

Harry and Hermione's animagus training and early revisions were going nearly perfectly and Hermione was preparing to be given the potion so that she could find her form. Harry had the forethought to grab a camera for the event and also brought a full length mirror so that she could see her form as well. Hermione had shown great progress in human transfiguration so Harry was almost assured that she would have a form.

Finally, the morning for Hermione's transformation had come. The previous two weeks had led up to the moment of truth as Remus and Sirius had both expressed their confidence that Hermione would have a form. Hermione however had been a nervous wreck the day and the night before and it took all of Harry's hugs and reassurances to get her to bed so that she would be rested enough for the day. Harry had awoken much like he had for the past month and went for his run and to lift some weights. When Harry went down the stairs for breakfast he found Hermione already down and nervously reading the previous day's prophet.

Harry came up behind Hermione and gently squeezed her shoulders before he said, "Hey don't be so nervous. I promise you that you will be fine and you get to see your form which will be a lot of fun. You will be tired afterwards but I promise to snuggle with you ok?" Hermione smiled and nodded, somewhat more confident after Harry's little pep talk.

They finished their breakfast and made their way up to the library. Harry had found that after his initial run in with Ron and Ginny the rest of the Weasleys had acquiesced to his requests and left the dueling room and the library alone. The twins had been rather quiet in their time at Black Manor spending the majority of their time concocting new pranks and products thanks to Harry's funding.

Harry handed Hermione the vial of potion he had carefully brewed over the past week. Harry then described the process and how it would feel if she had a form and how she would feel if she didn't have

a form. He then reassured her and indicated that with her success in the human transfiguration portion she almost certainly had a form.

Hermione drank down the vial and after a moment clutched at her sides just as Harry had when he underwent his first transformation. Harry spoke some reassuring words as the pain ripped through her body before Harry stood and took a picture with his wizarding camera. Hermione glanced around the room and could faintly hear the rhythmic beating of Harry's heart. She could also smell that faint odor of something that made her heart race and she glanced down and could see she had paws similar to Harry's. Harry led her to the mirror and she could see that she was a coyote much like Harry, but her form had a little more brown in her fur and had bright brown eyes instead of the emerald ones Harry had. She glanced up at Harry and could see the excitement and love in his eyes before she transformed back and was exhausted. Harry scooped her up and sat her down in the couch while he had her drink some pepper-up potion.

Hermione was feeling better after a few moments and finally vocalized her excitement, "Oh Harry we have the same form isn't that great. If we go out and do some reconnaissance we will just appear to be a pair of wild dogs."

Harry smiled and said, "Yes I'll have Professor McGonagall register you like she did for me."

Hermione arched her eyebrow and asked, "How did she register you Harry?"

Harry still smiling replied, "I am officially registered as dog with no distinguishing characteristics. We all figured it would be the best way to avoid any sticky situations with the ministry later."

Hermione nodded and said, "Yes that would be a wise move." Hermione then grew thoughtful and pondered aloud, "It is quite a coincidence that we each have the same form though isn't it?"

Harry smiled and replied, "I had a suspicion we would have the same form. A witch or wizard's form is tied to a combination of factors. First, the form may be influenced by the relation to any other animagus that they may know. Second the defining personality characteristics of a

witch or wizard are represented by the form. Last, if there is an overriding need or emotional connection to have a particular form. I have a theory if you're interested in hearing it by the way."

Hermione smiled seductively at Harry before she said, "Harry do you have any idea how snogable you are when you do research?"

Harry smirked and replied, "I guess I do now. Just so you know 'Mione, I'll be testing your statement several times this year at school."

Hermione playfully wagged her finger and said, "Don't get too cocky Potter." Hermione then smiled proudly at Harry and said, "I am very impressed at the thought you've put into this though. Now tell me how your theory applies to our forms."

Harry smiled and replied, "Well my initial guess is that a coyote is an accurate manifestation of our personalities. We both grew up with few friends and were rather solitary in our existence. While coyotes do tend to mate for life they do not travel in packs like other wild canine species. Anyways, we both are rather self sufficient people much like coyotes are known to be. I had met only three other animagus before and of them I am closest to Sirius hence the variation of the canine species. Same goes for you but you are closest to me so even more closely associated as being the same species. Alternatively, in my opinion we have a very strong emotional connection and that may have led to having the same form because subconsciously we may have willed our magic to have the same species and form."

Hermione pulled Harry in and gave him a deep kiss before she broke it and smiled. She softly said, "All of your theories have some merit Harry. Did you assume we might have the same form?"

Harry nodded and said, "I don't know it's just a feeling I had. I first got it when I transformed at your house in front of you. I was like a scent or an essence that was undeniable and I was attracted to it. Did you get that at all when you transformed?"

Hermione nodded thoughtfully and replied, "Yes there was a certain odor maybe a pheromone or something."

Harry nodded thoughtfully and replied, "Yes that's what it was. I'm almost certain of it now." Glancing at Hermione he smiled and said, "Well now all we need to do is get you trained to do that for extended periods of time and you'll have your form mastered."

The remainder of the day was spent working on Hermione's transformation and the amount of time she could stay in it. They found that when Harry was transformed it also helped Hermione hold her concentration better. They took several breaks in between turns and true to Harry's word they snuggled on the couch much to Hermione's delight and contentment.

Later that day after he had helped Hermione to bed after her exhausting first day as an animagus Harry went and visited his two partners in pranks Fred and George. Harry had suggested certain products for their new business which they proudly named Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. Harry had heard about some of the tentative measures that Umbridge was planning on instituting in the coming term so he wanted to have some Umbridge traps planned just in case and the twins were the perfect allies for the cause.

The next order meeting Harry took the time to talk to Professor McGonagall about running through the same paperwork for Hermione and to give the same description as had been given for his. When asked what their forms were Harry smiled and told her they would show her in private back at Hogwarts.

Emmy stopped by the day before they were to go to Diagon alley and brought along her wand making tools she still retained from her apprenticeship with Ollivander. After they talked about the basics of making wands she used a magical synchronizer on Harry and Hermione to determine the best wood for their wands. When Hermione asked Emmy why Ollivander didn't make wands this way, she simply said, "For one it is a lot more expensive. The other main reason is the sheer amount of wands Mr. Ollivander must make which simply won't allow it." Harry found he was still suited to a holly wand while Hermione's suited wood was ash.

A similar process was used to determine the core and Harry found that appropriately he had another phoenix feather but this one was

not from Fawkes and therefore not the brother wand to Voldemort's. Hermione's core was a unicorn hair and in the end she had a 13 inch ash wand with a unicorn hair core. Harry's new wand was a 15 inch holly wand with a phoenix feather core. They both thanked Emmy with hugs and waved as she left through the floo. The next day was going to be exciting so they both went to bed early in hopes it would come sooner.

A/N: Please review. Next chapter they have a busy day at Diagon alley planned. Thanks for reading and keep up the reviews they are helpful.

Chapter 16

Finally, the morning had come for Harry and Hermione to visit Diagon Alley. It was going to be a busy day as Harry needed to meet with the goblins to open talks for an alliance with the order of the phoenix. Harry also had to talk to the goblins about the Potter Estate which he wasn't informed of and to levy a charge against Dumbledore for improperly concealing the existence of the estate. Once he finally got out of Gringott's he was to go back and pick up Hermione and then back to the alley to do their school shopping.

Harry had awoken at 5 am so that he could still do his run and start his business at Gringott's as soon as they opened in the morning. Harry had a full workout and a nice long shower. Harry grabbed a button up shirt and some nice slacks and threw some light robes on over the top of them. Harry grabbed a quiet breakfast because he was up well before anyone else. He had remembered a book on goblin customs and was reading it as he sipped on his tea and nibble on some toast.

Eventually he picked up the prophet from the previous day to scan for news of deatheater activity. He wasn't surprised when he found an attack on a family of muggles and the appearance of the dark mark over their house after the massacre had finished. Soon after he read the article he realized he didn't have much of an appetite anymore.

Soon enough Hermione came down the stairs and she was joined by Molly as they discussed something of import. The Weasley's had made their journey to Diagon Alley a week earlier so they would enjoy a quiet and Weasley free day of shopping. They all discussed the plans for the day as Harry told Hermione that he would be back after his business at Gringott's was finished and they could enjoy the day with the accompaniment of Remus and Sirius.

Bill Weasley dropped in through the floo ready to take Harry to Gringott's for an extremely important meeting that could go a long way in deciding who the ultimate winner in the war to come would be. Bill looked at the assembled group at the table well aware that Remus and Sirius were most likely out on order business and the

twins Ron, and Ginny wouldn't be up for quite awhile yet. He smiled and said, "So Harry ready to go help us win a war."

Harry had to smirk at the statement because indeed he was the one that would win or lose the war and it had nothing to specifically do with goblins. Nonetheless Harry said, "Well I am certainly going to do my best." Harry gave Hermione a hug and kiss on the lips before he turned to leave.

Hermione grabbed him once more and gave him a dizzying kiss before she pulled away and shyly said, "That's for good luck." Harry smiled dazedly as Bill chuckled before they each took the floo to Gringott's to start the long day ahead.

They arrived in an office off of the main lobby in Gringott's and were immediately greeted by the one goblin he knew best, Griphook. Griphook smiled and bowed slightly before he said, "Mr. Potter the goblin delegation is awaiting you in the president's board room. If you would both just follow me."

Harry nodded courteously and replied, "Very well Griphook." Remembering his goblin etiquette book he continued, "Have your profits been great my friend?"

Griphook smiled a toothy smile and replied, "Mr. Potter I appreciate your admirable effort to pay me a compliment by understanding our customs but perhaps we can catch on such trivialities later after you speak with our delegation." Harry nodded and they continued their slow walk to the board room.

They entered the massive room and were greeted by the awe inducing sight of what must have been over 1,000 arranged in formation surrounding a small table which seated 3 powerful looking goblins. Harry did as he read and bowed swishing his robe around him before he said, "I am Harry James Potter Head of the clan Potter, and you honor me with your presence."

The three goblins bowed and returned the nicety before Harry was motioned to his seat. The middle goblin and obvious leader of the three spoke first, "Mr. Potter the goblin nation is interested in opening

the channels of diplomacy to you and the order of phoenix. What we need from you are certain assurances in this time of war."

Harry pondered for a moment remembering what Dumbledore had told him in regards to the goblins and how they would offer the goblins help in any time of need. Harry spoke with steel in his voice and said, "The order of the phoenix will come to the aid of the goblin people whenever you call upon us. Bill Weasley is to be your contact between you and the order. We can not offer wealth or power but just our aid in a time of need. Likewise we ask nothing more than you avoid the war and hamper the death eaters' financial endeavors with your considerable influence."

The head goblin nodded and asked, "Lord Potter why do you specifically wish to have the goblins allegiance for the war."

Harry nodded and looked contemplative for a moment before he said, "I guess I appreciate the honesty the goblins have always shown me. Griphook has been very kind to me since I was reintroduced to the wizarding world upon my 11th birthday and I guess I wish to repay that kindness and honesty with a formal relationship."

The 3 goblins spoke quietly for several long minutes as Harry had the opportunity to glance around him and see the intimidating presence of the goblin guard standing staunchly. Suddenly a smile came to Harry's face when he realized that the use of the guard as a means of intimidation was probably always the way goblins negotiated. Harry had a much better appreciation for the subtleties of goblins after realizing this fact.

The head goblin stood once more and simply said, "We accept your offer of aid and the goblin nation will aid you in the prescribed manner. Go safely, Head of the clan Potter." Fawkes arrived with a flash of fire signaling the legitimacy of the partnership and the goblins bowed as Harry left the room. Harry knew a respectful dismissal when he saw it so he bowed graciously in return before used a purposeful stride to exit the room.

Harry was met outside of the room by Bill and Griphook. Bill had a questioning and hopeful look on his face while Harry made sure his

betrayed no emotion. When Bill couldn't take it any longer he asked, "So Harry how did the talks go?"

Harry shifted his gaze to Bill; he smiled and said, "Well the goblins are with us if that's what you wanted to know."

Bill's grin was nearly so wide it broke his face before he said, "How? I mean how did you? No one ever gets what they want when they negotiate with goblins Harry, typically concessions are made and you just got what Dumbledore wanted and didn't offer more?"

Harry chuckled and replied, "Bill, you work for goblins, how is it that you don't know how to talk to them?"

Bill just shook his head exasperatedly as he laughed and said, "Harry Potter, you are something else."

They returned to the main lobby and Bill left to tend to some work matters before Griphook led him into the estate department so Harry could be informed of the Potter estate and its relative value.

Griphook took a file that was handed to him by the head goblin in the office and ushered Harry into a considerably smaller conference room. Griphook simply said, "I have been informed that Albus Dumbledore was supposed to inform you of your family's estate at the time of your 11th birthday and failed to do so. Is that correct Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded and replied, "Yes Griphook that is correct. I would like the necessary fines levied, but no further charges raised."

Griphook nodded and replied, "Very well Mr. Potter and where would you like the proceeds to be placed?"

Harry sighed and replied, "Place the fines in my trust account please." Griphook nodded and Harry glanced at the clock in the room before he said, "I have other matters to attend to this afternoon so if we could finish this as quickly as possible Griphook I would appreciate it."

Griphook smiled and replied, "Very well Mr. Potter. The papers I am setting before you indicate the liquid assets of your estate. The

tabbed folder to your left indicate the various properties and investments that are yours as well.” Harry nodded and looked over the balances on his assets and with some quick mental math he found he had well over 200 millions galleons that would be at his full disposal when he turned 17. His trust account with the fines already added, had a balance of 50,000 galleons which in its own right was a good share of money and plenty to get Harry through his years at Hogwarts in comfort.

Next he went through the tabbed folder and found his family owned a few houses throughout the colonial world and also some shares in some businesses. Harry found he actually owned an eighth of Ollivander’s and a minority share of the prophet. He silently mused if his children and grandchildren would be surprised that he was a founding partner of Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes when they stood to inherit such things.

Harry found everything to be in order and after he asked a few short questions to Griphook he thanked his goblin friend and requested he be allowed to make a withdrawal for the shopping of the day. Harry knew that Sirius would want to buy him everything for school but with the knowledge of how much money he had still fresh in his mind it really didn’t seem right. He withdrew about 1,000 galleons and had Griphook put a weightless charm on it before he met up with Bill again and took the floo back to Black Manor.

Harry returned to the Manor to find the Weasley’s all seated in the dining room with Hermione, Remus, and Sirius. They were in the midst of lunch when Harry walked in and all the talking stopped. Harry arched his eyebrow at the sudden absence of sound and said, “Um, hey guys what’s up?”

It only took a minute for the non-order members sans Hermione to be ushered out of the room so that Harry could tell them how his meeting with the goblins went. Remus asked, “So Harry, how did your trip to Gringott’s go?”

Harry planned on having some fun with everyone like he had with Bill so he sighed and ran his hands through his hair before he resignedly said, “What do you want to know about it? The part where I was

confronted with 1000 goblin guards or the part where I was informed of the fines?”

Everyone in the room gasped before Sirius asked, “Why were you confronted by 1000 guards kiddo?”

Harry smiled faintly letting his amusement trickle through slightly and replied, “I guess they were trying to intimidate me before the talks.”

Remus prodded and asked, “How did the talks go Harry?”

Harry smiled and replied, “We have an allegiance with the goblin nation just as Albus requested. Fawkes popped in and gave his stamp of approval right before I left.”

Molly quietly asked, “So let me get this straight, you got everything you wanted and how long were you exactly negotiating for?”

Harry shrugged and said, “They took our first offer no questions or concessions asked. They asked me specifically why I wanted to align myself with the goblins and I told them that I appreciated their honesty and kindness. I personally think I impressed them a little with my knowledge of goblin customs.”

Remus snorted and sarcastically said, “Yeah that was it Harry.” Upon Harry’s puzzled expression Remus continued in full professor mode, “Harry, goblins only accept a first offer from a party they view as their equal. So you alone they view as their equal notwithstanding the rest of the order. I’d say I’m surprised but, if anyone not named Dumbledore could pull it off it would be you.”

Harry nervously ran his hand through his hair and muttered under his breath, “Why did I waste my time reading the book then?” He glanced around and said, “I was going to treat lunch at the Alley but it looks like you guys couldn’t wait for me.” Seeing their repentant faces Harry shrugged and said, “I really don’t care that much but I hope you’ll wait for me here while I grab a bite to eat.” They all nodded and Harry helped himself to a sandwich that Dobby so generously made.

After they all cleaned themselves up they took a portkey made by Dumbledore to the Leaky Cauldron and were ready to start their

shopping. Hermione excitedly glanced around and said, "Oh I can't wait to see what new books they have. What about you Harry?"

Harry smiled at Hermione's infectious enthusiasm and replied, "I think I'll be getting some books for *research* and of course the course books too."

Hermione smiled seductively and replied, "Yes I think you should be doing a lot of research this year." Remus and Sirius watched the conversation and could only be reminded of Lily and James during their 7th year.

They made their first stop at Flourish and Bott's much to Hermione's delight as she led Harry around the store first picking up their course books and commenting to Harry about the new edition for the Arithmancy book before they started looking for more casual reading material.

Harry had told Hermione about the reality of his scar as a horcrux so she had been gathering as much information on the ritual as possible so they could perform the transfer before going back to Hogwarts. After they each had filled their own arms up with books along with Sirius and Remus' arms they paid for their bounty and moved on. Harry grabbed some books on silent casting and wandless magic.

Remus shrunk their books down and put them all into one bag before they moved on to Madame Malkin's.

Harry quietly asked Hermione, "Did you want to do some robe shopping for the year, my treat."

Hermione smiled and said, "Thank you Harry but you don't need to buy me anything. But I will help you get some new robes because you are already outgrowing the ones Sirius got you in the beginning of the summer. You'd be ok if you weren't growing like a weed."

Harry chuckled and said, "Yes but I am also aware that the lovely Ms. Granger has done some beautifying this summer also. How about I get you at least your uniforms for the year?"

Hermione smiled prettily and replied, "Thank you Harry that would be lovely."

Hermione browsed for a dress for the coming year's Valentine's Day ball while Harry picked up some new school robes and a couple of nicer dress robes. Harry felt that as the Head of the clan Potter he would need to take a little more pride in his appearance than before even though he didn't want to turn into Malfoy.

In the end Hermione decided to wait until closer to the dance to get a dress on a Hogsmeade weekend. She did get her school robes which Harry paid for along with his own robes which were an equal mixture of more formal robes and school robes. Once again Remus helped with the bags and they were shrunk and placed into the original bag with the books. After they finished shopping for robes they went to Fortescue's for some ice cream once again as Harry's treat. It was then that Harry broke the news of the size of his estate to Hermione. First Hermione gasped and then she blustered and finally she settled on gob smacked before she quietly asked, "Harry you do know I'd love you if you were didn't have any money don't you?"

Harry smiled stood up and scooped Hermione out of her seat and sat down with her in his lap. He looked into her chocolate brown eyes and said, "Hermione, if I have to I will spend the rest of my life convincing you that what we have can't be broken then that is exactly what I will do. Does that answer your question?" Hermione nodded and then nibbled on his lower lip before they deepened it into a loving kiss.

Eventually Sirius cleared his throat in order to stop Harry and Hermione from clearing their own. Remus was chuckling quite heartily before Sirius broke over the laughter and said, "Now that our shopping and other business is done I think we have some other business to discuss."

Harry and Hermione shared a quick look before they nodded, Sirius continued, "I believe that Remus and I are due a proper introduction to our newest Marauder and to give her a proper nickname. Then of course we will have to make the proper alterations to the map and finally remove the traitorous rat from it as well."

Hermione smiled while Harry's eyes held a certain pain and anguish that she had only seen on occasion at school after his nightmares and then in the past year in the days following Cedric's death. She tilted his chin so he was looking directly into her eyes before she softly said, "Harry it's ok to grieve and feel loss but you have to keep living for all of us. I love you Harry and I promise I'll never leave you ok?"

Harry managed a small smile and said, "I know Hermione but it never seems to stop hurting."

Hermione kissed his forehead and said, "Harry, my love, it never will stop hurting but you can't let it consume you ok?" Harry nodded and they all stood and took the portkey back to Black Manor after what had been a very long day.

They returned to the Manor to once again find the Weasley family engaged in a somewhat heated conversation. Ginny glanced up and saw that Harry and Hermione were holding hands as she scowled and mentally began plotting how to get Harry for her own.

Remus and Sirius joined and sat with Harry and Hermione as Molly requested they join for this particular discussion. Molly started, "Sirius, Harry we both have appreciated your generosity by allowing us to stay at your home. However, we believe it is time that we returned to the Burrow. We are aware this is a safer place to stay, but we refuse to put our lives on hold anymore while we wait for he-who-must-not-be-named and his followers to attack." The Weasley's all nodded their heads in consensus before Molly added, "Arthur and I owe you all a debt and we will not forget it."

Sirius spoke, "Molly I appreciate your words and I appreciate how you have so willingly followed the house rules after the first day. You owe us no debt because this is merely how friends treat one another. Just take care of yourselves and we'll see you soon." Harry, Hermione, and Remus nodded their heads in agreement before the Weasley's stood and left the room to pack.

Harry took the respite to address those closest enough to him that he called family as he said, "I know the burrow isn't the safest place in the world but the burrow is going to be empty once school starts. I

have a suspicion that the twins will be out on their own before Hogwarts is over and Ron and Ginny, well, Hermione and I will be able to protect them at school. Let's just go to bed, we have the marauder's induction to deal with don't we?" They all smiled and went their separate ways.

Remus left through the floo back to his cottage. Sirius did the same going to his now girlfriend, Emmeline Vance's apartment. Harry and Hermione smiled at each other and shared a nice long snog sitting at the base of the stairs before the thundering sound of the Weasley's broke them out of their bliss. They walked hand in hand to the top of the stairs before they parted with one last kiss.

A/N: Please Review. Next chapter will probably have a lot going on over the last few days before September 1st. Keep reading and reviewing.

Chapter 17

Harry awoke the next morning very excited about Hermione getting her nickname and their names being added to the Marauder's map and becoming a piece of history. Harry went for a run and worked the weights for a little while before he cleaned himself up and went to grab himself some breakfast. He was surprised to find Remus and Tonks chatting merrily about something while Hermione read what appeared to be the day's prophet. She glanced up at Harry and smiled prettily before he took a seat next to her and said, "Morning love what's in the news?"

Hermione smiled and took a sip of her tea before she replied, "Oh the ministry is still being totally irrational about Voldemort's return."

Harry nodded with understanding before he said, "Something tells me this Umbridge character isn't going to make this year easy for us. But, let's worry about that when we get to it."

Hermione nodded as she returned to her reading in relative peace. Harry took the opportunity to see how Tonks was doing. "So, what brings you to our neighborhood this time of the morning Tonksy?"

Tonks smiled brightly and replied, "Just catching up with Remus about some order business. You know how we are guarding the prophecy at the department of mysteries, well it's been tricky keeping a constant order presence around especially with Fudge's new measures."

Harry nodded and replied, "How do they store a prophecy?"

Hermione joined the conversation and replied, "Prophecies are automatically recorded when they are made and placed into orbs. Only the people that a prophecy is made about may open an orb and reveal its contents. Unfortunately not much else is known about how they know when a prophecy is made and why they are stored in orbs. Hence, it is called the department of mysteries."

Remus nodded and replied, "Yes, but I am amazed you know so much about divination Hermione, considering it's the one class you have never shown an interest in at Hogwarts."

Hermione smiled and replied, "Well I just don't like Professor Trelawney, and she is a bit too batty to be taken seriously. I actually find divination in its theory to be quite fascinating and prophecies happen to be rather intriguing."

Harry was smart enough to remain straight faced as Hermione discussed her newfound interest in prophecies ever since Harry had informed her of the one made about him. Harry then glanced to Remus and asked, "So Remus when are we going to start the festivities today?"

Remus smiled and replied, "Well we have to wait for Sirius to get back from wherever he was last night. Once he gets back, the fun can begin."

Tonks chimed in, "So Remus tells me that you two are animagus?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Yes Harry helped me master the transformation in about two and a half weeks. It took him about three weeks earlier this summer."

Tonks gaped for a moment before she said, "Cor blimey, that's amazing. I mean compared to how long it normally takes you both must have set some sort of record. Sirius told me it took him two years to master his form."

They all nodded before Remus said, "Well we also had Harry and Hermione cram about two years worth of transfiguration into two weeks so that doesn't hurt too much."

They all talked the remainder of breakfast about the ministry and the coming year at Hogwarts. By the time Sirius finally stumbled in through the floo Tonks was preparing to leave to start her shift at the ministry. Sirius looked a little worse for the wear but had a big grin on his face before he caught Tonks and said, "Hey little cousin what are you doing here? Giving Remus a little TLC?"

Tonks blushed as her hair shifted from blonde to pink before she said, "Stuff it Siri or should I start calling you Mr. Vance?" Tonks blew a kiss to Remus before she took the floo to the ministry; leaving a gaping Sirius in her wake as everyone else shared a laugh at the normally impossible to shut up Mr. Black.

Eventually Sirius recovered and realized what was ahead for the day as he took on the demeanor of a 5 year old on Christmas. He bounded into the kitchen and said, "So Hermione, Harry tells us you are quite the specimen."

Hermione blushed and Harry spit out the drink of tea he had. Hermione answered, "Well, Harry did say I was rather attractive. Of course he is rather biased isn't he?"

Harry smiled and replied, "Hermione sweetheart anyone who doesn't think that is simply blind." Harry gave Hermione a kiss on the cheek as she giggled.

Sirius rolled his eyes and mock exasperatedly said, "This is why we didn't allow any females in the group Moony."

Hermione's eyes narrowed before she said, "If I had to make a guess as to why there were no female Marauder's before I'd have a pretty safe guess that it had something to do with statements like that."

Sirius smiled and replied, "You are aware that Lily would have made the best marauder if we had ever made it official that is."

Harry's expression brightened before he asked, "Wow my mum was an animagus?"

Remus nodded and replied, "Yes Harry your mother was actually a cat like Professor McGonagall. A very pretty calico cat as I recall. Of course she was the brains behind all of our pranks 7th year and that was as the head girl no less. She truly was a great woman."

Everyone grew somber for a moment before Harry said, "Well something tells me that my mum wouldn't want us feeling bad especially now that Hermione is joining us. Now we just have to come

up with a nickname for her and then fix the map by adding our names and making a necessary removal.”

With those words everyone finished up their breakfast and made their way up to the dueling room for a day filled with fun.

Eventually they were all gathered in the dueling room awaiting the end of Hermione’s training and the beginning of a new era for the marauders. Finally, Remus said, “Ok guys although we already have Harry’s nickname figured out why don’t we put both of you through the paces for your official initiations so we can do the map and everything at once and then relax the rest of the day and share some stories. How does that sound?” They all smiled and nodded appreciatively before Harry and Hermione transformed into their coyote forms.

Remus and Sirius watched with rapt fascination as the coyote couple play wrestled each other before they turned their attentions towards the two senior marauders and chased them around the room. Sirius transformed and they had some fun padding around the room. After they had finished their fun they all transformed back and sat in a few chairs conjured up by Remus as they awaited their final initiation through the map.

Remus and Sirius conferred for a few moments before Sirius finally turned to face them and said, “Well Howler has already been given his nickname and now it is time for the lovely and talented and brilliant Ms. Granger to be given her nickname. Welcome to the marauders bookworm.”

Hermione looked hurt and Harry’s eyes narrowed at Remus and Sirius before he heatedly said, “That doesn’t even have anything to do with her form and it’s a hurtful thing to say. If you can’t think of a nickname to do with her form then at least call her something flattering.”

Sirius put his hands up as a means of showing he understood and they went back to discussing the nickname. Hermione grasped Harry’s hand and softly whispered in his ear, “Thank you Harry.”

Harry turned and whispered in her ear, "I just made a promise to myself that since you have always protected me from people I will protect you from people. I love how you are brilliant and use books. You should never feel bad because you are smarter or more motivated than someone else. This year at school I will make sure everyone knows that." Hermione gave Harry a dazzling smile before she gave him a peck on the lips and a nice long hug.

Finally, Remus turned towards them and said, "We apologize for our first attempt Hermione, Sirius thought it would be funny. Now without further delay welcome to the marauders Athena."

Hermione smiled and gave each Remus and Sirius a hug before she returned to Harry and gave him a kiss on the cheek before she twined her fingers with his. Sirius and Remus shared knowing looks before Sirius pulled out the marauders map and said, "Ok guys we need to gather around the map here and I'll ask you to cast a simple spell on the map when I say so ok?" Harry and Hermione nodded before Sirius continued, "But, first we need to get rid of some trash on the map."

Sirius muttered a spell under his breath and the map opened but instead of revealing a map it revealed the four different names of the marauders. Sirius muttered another spell and Wormtail was banished from the map. Sirius and Remus smiled at each other before they glanced back at Harry and Hermione. "Now I need each of you to point your wand at the map and say *expecto memorium*. The spell leaves a sort of personality imprint of the caster on an enchanted object."

Harry nodded and said, "*Expecto memorium*" a bright white light came from his wand and was absorbed by the map before the map said, "Mssr. Howler would like to thank Mssr. Moony and Padfoot for removing the rat from the map." Sirius smiled and ruffled Harry's hair before he smiled at Hermione and motioned for her to go.

Hermione took a deep breath and said, "*Expecto Memorium*" an equally bright light came from her wand and was similarly absorbed by the map. The map simply said this time, "Mistress Athena would like to thank honorary marauder Lily for bringing howler into the world

and for keeping Mssrs. Moony, Padfoot, and Prongs in line while at school. May you find peace in your next adventure.”

They all looked at Hermione before Harry wrapped her up into a big hug and said, “I think the marauders just regained their heart again.”

Soon after Hermione’s contribution to the map, they were all joined together in a hug before Sirius broke the hug and uttered, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.” and tapped the map with his wand.

The marauders map was revealed this time except the top now read, “Mssrs. Howler, Moony, Padfoot, Prongs, and Mistress Athena proudly present the marauders map.” The map filled out now Harry and Hermione were officially marauders and everything was right with the world.

The four marauders spent the next couple of hours exchanging Hogwarts stories. Remus and Sirius were rather impressed with all of the adventures that Harry, Hermione, and Ron had gotten into their first 3 years. They carefully avoided any talk of future adventures that would most likely not include Ron and moved on to some of the older marauder’s stories.

Sirius began, “Well my favorite story from our Hogwarts years happened during our sixth year when your father was trying to woo your mother. Remus and I were always encouraging him because it was apparent to us that he really cared about her. Well Remus came up with this great plan so that he could show how much he cared about Lily on Valentine’s Day. Your father spent the entire day trying every romantic thing he could. He greeted your mother with poetry before breakfast. As it was he embarrassed Lily and she ran from the hall in tears.”

“So why was my mum in tears after dad read her poetry?” Harry asked.

Remus answered, “Well Lily was very shy and didn’t like being the center of attention. Of course your father didn’t even think of this when he decided to read her the poetry in the middle of the hall.”

Sirius continued, "Well your father was quite depressed after he caused your mother to cry so he was determined to have her smiling before lunch. Well, evidently it was pick on Padfoot day because he transfigured my arms into a pair of lilies. Lily scolded him for that and then she left the class angry at your father. So with his first two attempts he had made your mother cry and get very angry at her."

Hermione asked, "So does this story get any better?"

Remus chuckled and replied, "Yes James does manage to save the day by the end."

Sirius continued, "Well James was getting rather despondent about how everything was going so he came to Moony and I to come up with something that would help him out. Remus suggested he get her some flowers and an apology while I suggested we prank Snivvelus. Fortunately he listened to Remus even though to this day I think my idea had some merit. Well in the great hall for dinner he quietly gave your mother the flowers and the apology card as well as the poetry he had written for her. He even told her he would stop bothering her if all he could do was hurt her. Lily of course didn't say anything after she had finished reading everything so James figured he had blown his chance with her. No matter what we said he wouldn't speak to us and he even snuck down to Hogsmeade and got himself some firewhiskey."

Harry asked, "Are you sure he manages to pull it out at the end, because from the sounds of things he hasn't really done anything."

Sirius ignored Harry and continued, "Well your father was getting quite sloshed and he didn't even notice when Lily came into the common room. James was rambling on about how he had blown it with the one girl he had ever really liked and then he said he probably even loved her. Lily overheard this and walked up to your father and asked him if he really liked her. Well your father said yes and then promptly threw up on her shoes. Lily bless her heart cleaned everything up for him and even cast a sobriety charm on him before they went for a walk down by the lake. By the time they got back they were holding hands and soon after they started dating. So that is how your dad got together with your mum."

Remus chuckled and said, "Yes, I guess the moral of the story is that love takes many different paths and as long as you don't give up on it things tend to work out in the end."

Hermione smiled and said, "Yes that actually is some very sound wisdom you speak Remus." She turned to Harry and gave him a kiss on the lips. She then whispered in Harry's ear, "See you didn't even have to read me poetry and you've already got me for the rest of your life."

Harry smiled and gave Hermione a warm hug before he turned towards Remus and Sirius and said, "Moony, Padfoot I just want to thank you both for being there for my parents and now for me. You really are both great friends and about the closest thing to uncles I'll ever have. Now why don't you guys go work on Remus' wisdom before the order meeting while Hermione and I do the same?"

By the time lunch was served they were all pretty spent emotionally so they decided to call it a day for the newest marauders' inductions. Harry and Hermione had other business to attend to as they were going to perform the horcrux transfer process and to free Harry from Voldemort's influence once and for all. Remus and Sirius both excused themselves to go visit their lady loves and promised they would be back by the time of the meeting.

Hermione had spent most of her free time the previous couple of weeks getting everything arranged and set up so that it would go off without a hitch. Neither knew if Harry would still be a Parseltongue once the ritual was completed. All Harry knew was that every fiber of his being wanted to be rid of the accursed thing and to move on with his life.

The library was devoid of furniture for the night thanks to Dobby's help as Hermione had made a ritual pentagram in order to channel the magic of the horcrux while keeping it trapped until it could be transferred to another object. In this case Hermione chose to use a blank diary much like the one Harry had destroyed in second year. Hermione had been playing with the idea that the diary was also a horcrux but she had no real concrete proof of such a guess.

Harry stood in the center of the pentagram and Hermione made the elaborate wand movement followed by an equally long spell in Latin before Harry felt a flash of pain in his scar before a green flash knocked Harry out of the pentagram and into a bookcase knocking him unconscious. Everything in Hermione's body told her to check on Harry but her brain convinced her to finish the ritual first. The ethereal soul piece was trapped in the pentagram and Hermione cast one final spell to trap the soul piece of the most vile creature alive into the blank diary she had bought there last trip to Diagon alley.

Once the soul piece was trapped and placed in an unbreakable container that only Hermione could open she ran over and checked on Harry. He was unconscious but breathing evenly. With a softly uttered *enervate* Harry returned to the land of the living. Harry opened his eyes and the first thing he saw were those chocolate brown eyes that he had fallen in love with.

"Hello beautiful." Harry murmured.

Hermione smiled and kissed Harry's forehead before she quietly asked, "So how do you feel?"

Harry snorted and replied, "Physically I feel like I just fell about 30 feet off of my broom onto my back. Mentally I feel the best I have ever felt in my entire life. I swear my brain feels free to do anything. Magically I feel more powerful than I have ever felt before. I can feel the magic flowing in my body and it's an incredible feeling. Emotionally I feel like I could never love someone else as much as you and my heart tells me that it's true. I love you so much Hermione." Hermione smiled brightly before he continued somewhat sheepishly, "But, can you maybe do something about my back it kind of hurts a lot."

Hermione smiled and did several healing spells she had learned over the years in Harry's many visits to the hospital wing. Hermione soon had Harry walking around again and experimenting with his magic. His spells were slightly more powerful but not the large difference that he had been expecting.

Hermione watched every spell Harry cast with great interest as there wasn't much written on Horcruxes and their effect on a living

receptacle. What Hermione noticed, was that Harry's magic hadn't necessarily grown stronger but it had changed for the better. All of Harry's spells were purer in their intent and final outcome. Charms that had always been a problem for Harry he was now doing without any problems and was completing them perfectly.

After they had finished experimenting with Harry's new magic, Hermione called Dobby to place the horcrux in her pre-selected safe place in the house. It had been a long but productive day and it was also the night of the final order meeting of the summer before they were to return to Hogwarts. Hermione had been granted the same access at order meetings as Harry as it was deemed better to have two students that were able to gather information than one while at the school.

Hermione took a seat between Remus and Harry as the meeting was adjourned. Hermione planned on taking notes on everything in order to review the activities of the order.

The meeting began as Dumbledore reviewed the guard duty for the prophecy at the ministry. Harry stood and asked, "Sir, why don't I get the prophecy and destroy it so he can never get his hands on it?"

There were murmurs amongst the group before Dumbledore spoke and said, "Normally I would suggest such an action, but if Voldemort spends his time concentrating on getting the prophecy instead of terrorizing everyone then it is time well spent." Harry nodded his assent and sat back down pleased with Dumbledore's explanation and honesty. Since Harry's birthday the headmaster had taken his promise of disclosure with Harry seriously and had even held frank discussions with Harry about his relative role in the war. The only thing Dumbledore had suspicions of at that point was that Harry's scar was a horcrux and that it would need to be destroyed eventually.

Harry had found the diary a very interesting read as he shared the memories of several battles during the war with Grindewald as he watched his normally placid headmaster take lives indiscriminately in order to save lives on his own side. More telling was how he never used unforgivables but just powered up lesser spells to the point where they became fatal. Harry learned that the headmaster was

married at one point and during one of the less pleasant memories early on in the year she was murdered by Grindewald in an attempt to break Dumbledore. Harry shuddered when he thought that Voldemort might try the same thing against Hermione so he decided he would protect her life at all costs.

The meeting continued as Dedalus spoke of how the ministry was attempting to push full control at the school and by using educational decrees they could change anything short of the school charter at the school. Hermione wrote everything down dutifully even though she was becoming concerned of the presence of a tyrannical muggleborn hater having ultimate power in the school. Harry could sense her anxiety and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze which she returned with a grateful smile. Hermione mused to herself at how much Harry had grown up since his name had been drawn from the goblet and how he always attempted to help her and make her feel better. She was sure they would both need each other's support in order to make it through the year.

Snape stood next and gave his report on Voldemort's activities and personally informed Harry and Hermione that he would be particularly hard on them in class to protect his position from Umbridge for the year. He also promised that he would give them additional lessons so that their grades wouldn't suffer as a result and it would show up on their schedules as remedial potions. Hermione was grateful and surprised that Snape of all people was concerned about their marks for the OWL's.

Dumbledore then stood and reported for Hagrid and Maxime about their talks with the giants. Dumbledore indicated that the giants had promised not to fight for either side in the coming war which was an important victory for the light side. He also indicated that Hagrid would be bringing his half brother Grawp with him to the school, and that *certain* parties should make an effort to meet him. He finished his statement by peering over his glasses at Harry and Hermione.

Remus stood and explained his progress with the werewolf communities and how Fenrir Greyback, the werewolf that had originally turned him, was working for Voldemort to recruit as many werewolves as he could. Remus also indicated that he and Sirius

would be working the guard duties at the ministry the most of anyone as long as it was needed.

Moody stood and indicated that the auror ranks were indeed gaining in numbers and that it would be a formidable force before the end of the year. Tonks and Shacklebolt echoed their agreement with the sentiment which pleased Dumbledore greatly.

McGonagall stood next and indicated that Hermione had been issued the same paperwork as Harry had and that they were both officially registered animagus. Most of the order members paid both Harry and Hermione compliments, even to their shock Snape, who merely said, "Impressive accomplishment Potter and Granger."

The meeting was finally adjourned but Dumbledore motioned Harry and Hermione over to speak to him following the meeting. Dumbledore simply said, "Harry, Hermione I am afraid that with Umbridge as your DADA professor your practical work in the subject will suffer more than it already has your first 4 years. Accordingly, I would like you to start an official student group called the defense association. You two will be the students in charge of the group while I will just sit in during the occasional meeting to monitor your progress. I will of course place the group at a time so you may fit it into your already full schedules. We will meet twice a month at a time of your leisure. I will forward the paperwork if you are interested. Do you accept?"

Hermione glanced at Harry excitedly who nodded before she said, "Yes sir we would be honored to help teach students their defense work. Will we need to give you a course plan for the group?"

Dumbledore smiled and replied, "That would be most helpful Hermione and I assume you would want to undertake this task while you have Mr. Potter lecture with your notes?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Yes sir, I assume the members will definitely listen to Harry more than any other student in the school."

Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling as he was clearly pleased and said, "Most outstanding. This will of course go nearly all of the way in guaranteeing your head boy and girl positions when that time comes.

Please feel free to visit me in my office at your leisure this next year, the password is jolly rancher.”

Dumbledore dismissed the pair as he took a portkey back to the castle and was clearly pleased that he had the young couple back in his good graces because he could already tell they would be the most powerful allies he could have for the war ahead. He could sense a very positive change in Harry and Hermione’s magic since the beginning of the summer and already Harry’s raw magical power was very close to his own.

The days after the meeting were spent working on their first assignments and revisions for OWL’s. Harry’s magic continued to become more concentrated and powerful, and by the end of the week Harry was able to conjure very impressive shields and no longer had to worry about nightmares or visions from Voldemort. On the morning of September 1st the pair was becoming rather excited about the year ahead and the challenges it would present.

A/N: Thanks for reading and reviewing. Back to Hogwarts next chapter. Malfoy sightings, Prefect Meetings, New Alliances, and of course the sorting hat. Keep Reading and reviewing.

Chapter 18

Harry awoke at 6 am and started his daily routine like he had established during the summer. Harry was getting the best sleep of his life since he had freed himself of Voldemort's soul piece. Harry returned from his workout and took a nice long shower before he put on a nice pair of slacks and a polo shirt underneath his robes. He proudly pinned his Prefect badge on his robe and spiked his hair up with a touch of Sleekeasy's before he went downstairs with his trunk and Hedwig in her cage.

Harry was greeted with the sight of Hermione who had her trunk and Crookshanks bed as they both levitated their contents down to the entrance of the house. Hermione greeted Harry with a smile and said, "So are you ready for another year of this love?"

Harry sighed and replied, "Well I'd find it hard to believe that this year will be any less busy than last year but at least I'll have you around the entire year to share it with and that makes all the difference to me."

Hermione flushed and smiled prettily before she replied, "Harry, just so you know I feel the same way about you. I wouldn't want to share this with anyone else and for the first time we are a couple when we start the year and that means we can handle everything together, no more dealing with stuff alone anymore ok love?" Harry nodded and they placed their trunks on the ground before they went over to the table to enjoy some breakfast.

Harry was reading over the Prefect rulebook once more as he sipped on his tea and nibble on a biscuit. Crookshanks was rubbing Harry's leg trying to get himself some food while Hermione watched the exchange with a bemused expression.

Harry eventually broke off the end of a piece of bacon and gave Crookshanks a small bit of it which was met with some heavy purring and Hermione giggles. She tried to look reproachful but failed miserably as she said, "You know Harry, you really shouldn't feed him under the table because now all he is going to expect from you is food when he sees you."

Harry made his crooked smile and replied, "Nah, me and Crooks have an agreement I give him food once and awhile and he keeps an eye out for you when I'm not around. It's a guy thing love, I wouldn't expect you to understand."

Hermione giggled and said, "Yes how silly of me to think that Crookshanks just isn't taking advantage of you."

Harry smiled and said, "I'm glad you see the error of your ways 'Mione."

Sirius and Emmy made their way down the stairs together as had become the routine over the course of the past few weeks. Sirius would spend a night at Emmeline's place and she would spend a night at Black Manor. They took in Harry and Hermione's banter at the table and shared a knowing smile and a kiss.

Emmeline sat down next to Sirius and asked, "So you two are you ready for your OWL year at Hogwarts?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Yes we've already made quite a lot progress on our revisions, finished our first assignments, and Harry's actually worked a couple of months ahead for History of Magic."

Emmy looked impressed and said, "Wow you two are really motivated aren't you. First, you become animagus over the summer while you juggle you roles with the order and then you still have time to work ahead in classes. Do you actually have any time for fun?"

Harry smiled and replied, "It's always fun when I spend time with this one." Hermione smiled and gave Harry a peck on the cheek.

Sirius chuckled before he said, "With Harry's high profile as a target we will be traveling by ministry car that have been loaned under other pretenses. There will also be a few order members flying invisible above the car as a look out for potential threats. Once you get to the station though you are on your own."

Harry and Hermione both nodded before they returned to a private conversation about the duties of Prefects on the train and their duties and privileges in the school. Hermione lectured Harry about being fair

and that they could only take points away and order detentions for serious offenses. Harry laughed and said, "Hermione you actually think I would do something like that. I mean look what I went through because I refused to play with Malfoy last year and didn't retaliate."

Hermione shamefacedly replied, "I'm sorry Harry sometimes I forget how well you handled all of that last year."

Eventually breakfast wound down and Sirius told them to go take the Invisibility cloak outside and wait for the ministry car. He indicated that their trunks and familiars would go in the second car. Harry and Hermione went outside the front door of Black Manor for the first time barely fitting under the same invisibility cloak that they had shared with Ron to sneak out to Hagrid's on several occasions in their earlier years.

Two Black Lincolns pulled up outside of 13 Grimmauld Place as Harry and Hermione snuck over to the cars and threw off their invisibility cloak and were greeted by Mad Eye and Tonks. They were ushered into the car as they spotted Sirius and Emmeline throwing the trunks and Crookshanks and Hedwig into the back seat of the second car before waving Harry and Hermione good bye until Christmas.

Tonks up a conversation from the front seat as she said, "Wotcher you two, Hermione you better keep an eye on Harry this year from the looks of things he'll have even more girls after his cute bum."

Harry blushed as Hermione defiantly said, "Well those silly girls can try but Harry isn't going anywhere are you love?"

Harry smiled and took Hermione's hand and gently said, "No, love I am not going anywhere." Hermione looked smugly up at Tonks who laughed heartily.

Moody then spoke, "So Potter, Granger how did you know it was us and not some deatheaters in disguise?"

Harry glanced at Hermione who nodded as he said, "Well our animagus forms have lent to our regular senses so we can tell who people are by scent, kind of like Remus."

Moody looked like Christmas had come early when he said, "You mean that polyjuice won't work on you anymore?" Then he grew skeptical and asked, "What if we were under imperius?"

Hermione sheepishly replied, "Well like your scent we can kind of hear your heartbeat and someone under imperius tends to have an extremely slow heartbeat. It's not foolproof but when in conjunction with your behavior it wasn't hard to tell."

Moody had a brief laugh before he said, "Too true lass. I'd say you both did a fine job of making full use of your abilities to practice CONSTANT VIGILANCE. Don't let it go to your heads though."

Harry mock solemnly said, "Yes sir, we'll be drinking out of a flask by the end of the year."

Fortunately Moody was the only one who didn't catch the sarcasm and replied, "Good to hear lad."

The remainder of the trip was spent discussing Quidditch with Tonks as Hermione tuned them out with a book.

They arrived at the station and got out of the ministry cars a full hour before the train was to depart. Harry and Hermione grabbed their trunks and Crookshanks and Hedwig before they gave their final farewells and boarded the train. They were surprised to find Neville sitting in a compartment alone reading a Herbology text. Harry and Hermione dragged their trunks into the compartment.

Neville glanced up from his book and smiled broadly before he asked, "Hi Harry, Hermione how were your summers?"

Harry smiled and replied, "Well it was easily the best summer of my life." Harry spoke as he hung Hedwig's cage up on a hook.

Hermione nodded and said, "Yes it was a brilliant summer." As she sat Crookshanks bed down with the half kneazle already sleeping in it.

Neville caught the shine of the badges on their robes and smiled before he said, "Oh brilliant, I was hoping you two would be named the prefects for 5th years. At least this way we'll have fair prefects."

They chatted for awhile while the train slowly filled up. Neville complimented Harry on his new look and also discussed how Ginny had broken up with him during the summer which he didn't seem too bothered by. They all noticed that each had grown quite a lot during the summer as Neville had begin to lose his baby fat and started to grow straight up like Harry was. Hermione had grown a couple on inches and her facial features looked more mature and lovely. Harry had grown about 4 inches and was nearly a head taller than Neville while Hermione came up to his nose. They were eventually joined by a strange 4th year Ravenclaw girl named Luna Lovegood who Hermione had tutored in Arithmancy the previous year and accordingly had been tutored along with Harry.

Luna carried a dream expression most of the time as her eyes were rarely focused on any one object. She airily said, "Hello Harry, Hermione and friend how were your summers?"

Harry glanced at Hermione and Neville before he answered, "They were good how was yours?"

Luna smiled absently and answered, "Daddy and I searched for Crumple-Horned Snorcacks but we couldn't find any. Next year we'll be searching in Sweden."

Hermione who was at odds with the blonde most of the time rolled her eyes as Neville chuckled. Harry had always thought the girl wasn't really as loony as she appeared and simply answered, "That sounds lovely Luna."

Luna smiled and replied, "Thank you Harry I appreciate it when people actually take the time to look at something before they dismiss it. Your eyes are very pretty."

Harry blushed and replied, "Um, thanks Luna, my uncles got my some contacts for my birthday." Harry didn't notice as Hermione scowled at Luna behind him.

Luna answered, "Hermione I'm not flirting with Harry just pointing out a truth."

Hermione scoffed until Harry glanced at her and gave her a disapproving look and she answered, "I'm sorry Luna, I guess I'm just tired of girls always flirting with Harry."

Luna nodded knowingly and replied, "Yes, Ginny told me she was trying to get together with Harry this year so you might want to watch it for her."

Hermione looked grateful at the aloof blonde and said, "Thank you Luna for the warning. Would you like to continue our Arithmancy sessions this year again?"

Luna smiled and said, "Yes, that would be lovely. I assume that Harry will be with you again this year." Hermione nodded and then Luna shifted her attention to Neville and said, "You're Neville Longbottom aren't you?"

Neville looked up and said, "Uh erm yeah Luna right?"

Luna smiled and nodded before she asked, "Do you know that the Snorcack's are herbivores?" Neville shook his head before Luna continued, "Would you care to discuss their natural food while we are on the trip?" Neville nodded and Luna sat down across from him.

Harry smiled at Hermione before he glanced at his watch and noticed they only had ten minutes until the prefect meeting in the head's compartment. Harry said, "Hermione, we need to start our way up for the meeting." Hermione nodded and took Harry's hand as they exited the compartment.

They ran into Ginny and Ron as Harry smiled at the pair while Hermione's expression was strangely neutral. Harry said, "Hey guys our compartment is down there if you want to join us. We have to go to the prefects meeting and then we'll be back. Just leave the seats where Crooks and Hedwig are by open ok?"

Ron and Ginny both nodded as Ginny flicked her hair and batted her eyes at Harry.

Harry shook his head and simply said, "Ginny, you need to give it up. I am with Hermione and that's not going to change. Find a boy who is

interested in you and don't mess with us ok?" The words weren't said in a threatening way but they were certainly a threat as Ginny gulped before she left with Ron to the compartment.

Hermione was looking smug after Harry said that. She smiled at Harry stood up on her toes and whispered in his ear, "I hope that puts an end to her nonsense love."

Harry nodded as they continued walking forward before he said, "You do know that it is going to be worse than last year especially now that I've got contacts and that blasted order of Merlin."

Hermione smiled and said, "Yes it will be, but I'll take care of you ok Harry?" Harry nodded as Hermione giggled and then gave Harry a kiss on the lips.

They were rudely broken up by Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson who was dutifully playing the part of window furnishing on his arm. Draco sneered, "So Scarhead, I see a few near death experiences haven't made you any smarter about the opposite sex. What does the mudblood do for you to keep her around?"

Harry calmly said, "Mr. Malfoy one more insult and I will dock you points before we even get to Hogwarts. Something tells me your head of house won't appreciate that." Draco sneered and walked past them with his head held so high that Harry doubted he could even see where he was walking.

Harry shrugged at Hermione before he whispered in her ear and said, "Do you think he keeps Pansy around as a Seeing Eye dog, because I doubt he can see with his head tilted like that."

Hermione laughed and replied, "Yeah, I'm sure it is exactly something like that."

They continued to the front of the train until they entered the head's compartment and were greeted by the head boy and girl Roger Davies who was Fleur's date at the Yule Ball and Alicia Spinnet from Gryffindor. Roger greeted them warmly, "Ah Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger our fifth year Gryffindor prefects how were your summers?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Our summers were good Headboy and how were yours?"

Roger smiled and replied, "It was fine thank you."

Alicia smiled and saw Harry and Hermione holding hands before she said, "So Harry I see you got some contacts this year." Harry smiled and nodded before she continued as she whispered in Harry's ear, "I can't wait for Quiditch this year Katie was named captain you know." Harry nodded and then she added, "Take care of Hermione she is a special person." Harry smiled and nodded before they took their seats.

They sat next to the Slytherin fifth year prefects Blaise Zabini a dark haired pureblood and Daphne Greengrass a pretty blonde who Hermione actually thought was decent for a Slytherin.

The prefects meeting was a rehash of the rule book and then a brief mention of the fact that there may be rule changes over the course of the year by the high inquisitor. Only the Slytherin sixth and seventh year prefects appeared pleased with the news. There was also a brief mention of the responsibilities and patrol schedules along with a discussion about the Valentine's day ball and what the prefects would be needed to do in order to have it all set up. They were dismissed with instructions to make one patrol of the train at a specified time and given their patrol schedules. Fortunately, Harry and Hermione started the patrols so they immediately started patrolling right out of the meeting. They didn't find anyone doing anything inappropriate and returned to their own compartment to relax the rest of the trip.

As they entered the compartment Harry said with a sigh, "This is going to be a long year 'Mione."

Hermione smiled and gave Harry a peck on the cheek before she asked, "Yes it will. By the way what did Alicia whisper to you when we got to the head's compartment?"

Harry smiled and said, "She told me to take care of you because you are a special person and I agreed."

Hermione smiled brightly and gave Harry another kiss on the cheek before they took their seats. Ron was playing Neville in chess as

Ginny and Luna were discussing something unintelligible to the trained ears of even Harry and Hermione meaning they had put an imperturbable charm up to prevent eavesdropping.

Harry sat down and pulled out a planner and his notes that he and Hermione had compiled for the DA. Hermione leaned against Harry's chest and sat between his legs as he had them spread out on the seat. They read their plans for the new group and they made small changes and offered suggestions to iron out the final details. After about an hour of the discussion Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass entered the compartment.

Ron sneered, "What the bloody hell do you want?"

Blaise ignored Ron's blathering and looked at Harry and Hermione before he asked, "Could I speak with you two in an empty compartment for a minute about prefect business."

Harry and Hermione shrugged and stood up and followed them out of the compartment and into a nearby empty compartment. As they entered Daphne sealed the doors with a *colloportus* as Blaise cast an imperturbable charm. Harry and Hermione shared a look before Blaise started, "We know that you have no real reason to trust anyone from Slytherin either of you, but would you be willing to hear us out for a minute?"

Harry nodded and said, "I see no reason not to."

Blaise continued with an appreciative nod before he said, "Daphne and I would like to join your defense association this year."

Hermione answered, "Why would we have a problem with that? It is open to everyone you know."

Daphne replied, "No it won't be, because Umbridge is going to disband all student clubs and associations except for Quidditch so that they can be reformed to ministry guidelines. Basically meaning, that nothing useful will be learned or done in anything including the DA."

Blaise nodded and added, "So if you want to do the DA like you planned it will have to be on the down low with small enough numbers to ensure privacy. We would like to be amongst those small numbers."

Harry asked, "So is there any particular reason you want to learn this stuff?"

Blaise smiled which was somewhat disturbing from a Slytherin before he said, "May I call you Harry?" Harry nodded and Blaise continued, "Harry, we are in the minority amongst our house in that we don't support Voldemort or his beliefs in the least and our families will openly break against the dark lord if we are given protection. We will both need every advantage we can muster to survive until that happens. That's where the DA and your teaching come in. Do you follow us now?"

Harry shared a look with Hermione who gave a hesitant nod before he said, "Yes that will work. Now we just need to find a way to keep this secret, if what you are saying is correct. Thanks for the warning though." Blaise and Daphne nodded before they released their spells and parted ways.

Hermione pondered, "I think we should trust them Harry. I've always gotten along with Daphne despite the fact that she is a pureblood and I'm a muggleborn. Blaise has always been a bit of a loner from as far as I can remember too, so I think they are trustworthy." Harry nodded his agreement before they each went into thought for a moment.

Harry finally said, "We need to find a room in the school that is a secret and still will allow us the room and facilities necessary to do some training. Maybe I can see if Dobby has any idea."

"Dobby." Harry called out.

With a pop Dobby appeared, "Yes Master Harry Potter sir how is Dobby helping you?"

Harry smiled and replied, "Do you know of a large hidden room in the school with adequate training and space for roughly 20 people."

Dobby shook his head vigorously and answered, "Yes there is a come and go room on the seventh floor, that is what Master Harry Potter needs."

Harry crooked his eyebrow and asked, "Dobby what is a come and go room?"

Dobby continued, "Room is what you wants it to be. It's across from Barnabas tapestry. Just need to walks by it three times while you think of whats you needs room to be. Room can't be found and can be spelled to only open for specific people by headmaster."

Harry smiled and said, "Thank you Dobby you are a lifesaver. Give my greetings to Sirius and Remus if you see them ok?" With a head shake and a soft pop Dobby was gone.

Harry glanced at his watch and could see they only had a few minutes until they got to the station and they returned to their compartment where Harry made notice of the time and they cleared the compartment while everyone had gotten changed.

They exited the train and immediately spotted Hagrid who was calling for all the first years. Hagrid noticed them and bellowed, "Ah 'arry, 'ermione how were your summers?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Good Hagrid we heard you kept busy too."

Hagrid crouched down and whispered to the pair, "I 'eard you want to see old Grawpy. He's still a little wild but as soon as I got 'em settled down a little I'll set up a meeting." They both nodded as they got into a carriage with Neville, Luna, Ron, and Ginny.

Harry asked Ron, "Hey where were the twins at?"

Ron shrugged and replied, "They got on with us. They must have been testing their products on first years."

Hermione scoffed and said, "Well they better be careful because I'll dock them points and Harry will too, won't you?"

Harry hated being put on the spot by Hermione so he hedged his bets and answered, "If I catch them doing something bad I'll dock the twins points." Hermione seemed mollified by the statement and didn't bother Harry again on the ride except to give him a hug and a kiss.

Soon Harry found himself seated in the great Hall next to Hermione as they held hands. The sorting hat was trotted in by Professor McGonagall who appeared rather tense. She sat the stool and hat down and everyone waited for the Hat's song. *O.O.T.P.* pg204-07.

In times of old when I was new

And Hogwarts barely started

The founders of our noble school

Thought never to be parted;

United by a common goal,

They had the selfsame yearning,

To make the world's best magic school

And pass along their learning

'Together we will build and teach!'

The four good friends decided

And never did they dream that they

Might some day be divided,

For were there such friends anywhere

As Slytherin and Gryffindor?

Unless it was the second pair

Of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw?

*So how could it have gone so wrong?
How could such friendships fail?
Why, I was there so I can tell
The whole sad, sorry tale.
Said Slytherin, 'We'll teach those
Whose ancestry is purest.'
Said Ravenclaw, 'We'll teach those whose Intelligence is surest.'
Said Gryffindor, 'We'll teach all those
With brave deeds to their name.'
Said Hufflepuff, 'I'll teach the lot,
And treat them just the same.'
These differences caused little strife
When first they came to light,
For each of the four founders had
A house in which they might
Take only those they wanted, so,
For instance, Slytherin
Took only pure-blood wizards
Of great cunning, just like him,
And only those of sharpest mind
Were taught by Ravenclaw*

*While the bravest and the boldest
Went to daring Gryffindor.
Good Hufflepuff, she took the rest,
And taught them all she knew,
Thus the houses and their founders
Retained friendships firm and true.
So Hogwarts worked in harmony
For several happy years,
But then discord crept among us
Feeding on our faults and fears.
The houses that, like pillars four,
Had once help up our school,
Now turned upon each other and,
Divided, sought to rule.
And for a while it seemed the school
Must meet an early end,
What with duelling and with fighting
And the clash of friend on friend
And at last there came a morning
When old Slytherin departed
And though the fighting then died out*

*He left us quite downhearted.
And never since the founders four
Were whittled down to three
Have the houses been united
As they once were meant to be.
And now the Sorting Hat is here
And you all know the score:
I sort you into houses
Because that is what I'm for,
But this year I'll go further,
Listen closely to my song:
Though condemned I am to split you
Still I worry that it's wrong,
Though I must fulfill my duty
And must quarter every year
Still I wonder whether Sorting
May not bring the end I fear.
Oh, know the perils, read the signs,
The warning history shows,
For our Hogwarts is in danger
From external, deadly foes*

And we must united inside her

Or we'll crumble from within

I have told you, I have warned you...

Let the Sorting now begin

Harry looked at Hermione who whispered in his ear, "See, the sorting hat wants us to work with Blaise and Daphne. The DA is our chance to unite the school in at least a small way. I think we should try to get at least 2 people from each house." Harry nodded before the sorting hat sorted the numerous first years into their respective houses.

Dumbledore stood with his eyes twinkling like mad before he spoke, "Welcome to another year at Hogwarts. I will make announcements following the feast so dig in."

While they ate Harry and Hermione were making a list of those people to invite to join the DA. They agreed no one below a 4th year would be invited to join in order to have only those students capable of doing more advanced spells. They had settled on several students. Daphne and Blaise from Slytherin. Luna Lovegood, Terry Boot, Padma Patil, and Cho Chang from Ravenclaw. Hannah Abbot, Susan Bones, and Ernie McMillan from Hufflepuff. The 4 Weasleys, Harry, Hermione, Alicia Spinnet, Neville, Lavender, Parvati, and Dean Thomas to round out the 20 members. They were both happy with the list and had secondary people selected in the event that anyone turned down an invitation.

Before they knew it dinner was over and Dumbledore stood once again to make his announcements for the year. Dumbledore spoke clearly and said, "This year marks a year of many changes here at Hogwarts. A long dead position has been revived by the ministry and will be filled with Madam Umbridge." A short squat woman that looked like a toad stood and bowed.

Finally, the woman spoke "Hem hem, I wish to announce several educational decrees and the creation of an inquisitorial squad. The decrees will be posted in each common room so that you may grown acquainted with them. The members of my inquisitorial squad will

have the same duties as Prefects but they report to me instead of the headmaster or head students. A list of those students will also be found in each common room. I look forward to a successful year from all of you in my class Defense Against the Dark Arts. I expect proper behavior from all of you regardless of your lineage and demand that you respect your superiors in the school.” Umbridge sat down as Malfoy and his cronies pointed and laughed at Harry and Hermione.

Dumbledore continued, “As Madam Umbridge mentioned she will be filling the D.A.D.A post for us this year. Additionally Firenze of the Centaurs will be joining us to split take care of the upper level Divination course. The head students for the year are Ms. Alicia Spinnet and Roger Davies. If you have an issue with other students please ask your house prefects who may forward the issue to the head students if necessary. Finally, this year Hogwarts will be hosting a Valentine’s Day ball. Fourth years and above are welcome and younger students may come if they have an older student as a date. For now will the fifth year prefects lead the younger students to their common rooms and inform them of the password to the portraits. Good luck and health for the coming year.”

Hermione stood up and prodded Harry in the ribs as they gathered the younger students and led them to the Fat lady. Harry looked around at the younger children who he knew towered over and mused, “Were we ever really that small?”

Hermione smiled at Harry and replied, “Yes you were. Probably smaller in fact. Thanks to those horrid people.” She finished with a scowl.

Harry shrugged as they reached the portrait. The fat lady was in a discussion with Sir Cadogan. Hermione clearly said, “Veni Vidi Vici.” As they lead the Gryffindor students into the common room. Hermione found her favorite chair in the room and dragged Harry over and forced him to sit down so she could join him in his lap.

Hermione sighed as she watched the younger students scurry about before she said, “Did you notice how Umbridge mentioned lineage in her class and demanded we respect our superiors.”

Harry nodded his head and said, "Yeah I know she is going to be rotten to you, because you are successful and a muggleborn. Just remember I'll look out for you no matter what love."

Hermione nodded before they heard shouts from over by the bulletin board that sounded like Ron. "Oy all student groups must be disbanded and can only restart with the consent of the High Inquisitor. That's bullocks."

Another voice that sounded like Ginny moaned, "Oh no Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson are on the inquisitorial squad. Actually there all Slytherins oh bloody hell."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other with no small measure of trepidation and realized the long year had just gotten longer.

A/N: Please Review. The story will start picking up now. The DA won't be meeting for a few chapters. The next couple of chapters will focus on classes and how Harry and Hermione handle Umbridge and the Inquisitorial squad. Keep reading and keep up the reviews.

Chapter 19

Harry awoke at 6 am and decided to go outside for a run in the brisk early fall morning in Scotland. He did a few laps around the lake and was content that he had somewhere while the weather allowed it. Harry also began pondering whether the room for the DA would work that way also.

Harry took a shower and put on a t-shirt and pair of slacks under his new school robe. He pinned his prefect badge on his robe and fixed his hair before he went down to the common room. Harry wasn't surprised to find Hermione down in the room waiting for him. She waved and smiled before she said, "Let's go down and get an early breakfast, and our schedules, so we'll have time to come back and get the necessary books." Harry nodded and he took Hermione's hand as they made their way down to the great hall.

As they chatted during breakfast Hermione described the various educational decrees which in essence gave Umbridge ultimate power over the school making Dumbledore nothing more than a lame duck headmaster. He did still have power over expulsion of students but that remained to be the only thing he still controlled. Professor McGonagall walked up to the pair with their schedules in hand. She softly said, "Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger I see you have identical schedules this year. I hope your OWL results follow your marks from this past year. Good luck in class today to the both of you."

Schedule

Monday

Double History of Magic 8 am – 9:30 am

Potions 10:30 am - 12 pm

Ancient Runes 1 pm – 1:45 pm

Double DADA 3 pm – 4:30 pm

Remedial Potions 6 pm – 6:45 pm

Tuesday

Double Charms 8 am – 9:30 am

Transfiguration 10:30 am – 11:15 am

COMC 1 pm – 1:45 pm

Herbology 3pm – 3:45 pm

Wednesday

Arithmancy 8 am - 8:45 am

Transfiguration 10:30 am – 12 pm

COMC 1 pm – 1:45 pm

Herbology 3pm – 3:45 pm

Thursday

Double Potions 10:30 am – 1pm

Remedial Potions 2 pm – 2:45 pm

Astronomy 11 pm – 11:45 pm

Friday

Prefect Rounds 6 pm – 12 pm

Harry looked over his schedule a few times before he said, “So it looks like Mondays are our bad days, eh?”

Hermione nodded and began scribbling in her planner as she made out a study schedule for the semester. Hermione had indicated to Harry that she wanted to take the OWL for muggle studies also but Harry drew the line for himself at 10 classes, Quidditch, and prefect duties, along with any other business they were needed for.

Hermione eventually spoke, "Well I think we can work on smaller assignments on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings and work on our projects Thursdays and Fridays. I assume we'll do the DA on Tuesday or Wednesday night twice a month right?" Harry nodded and she scribbled some more in her book and finally said, "I think we need to talk to the headmaster and set up DA meetings for the room on Tuesday nights. According to the prefect rounds schedule that is the night when the Slytherin fifth year prefects are patrolling so I think we can get him to take part of their patrol while they are in the meeting. Does that sound good Harry?" Harry nodded and Hermione finally put her planner away.

They enjoyed the rest of their breakfast before they returned to the common room with their books and first assignments for Charms and History of Magic.

Harry took Hermione's bag and his own over one shoulder which thankfully weren't too heavy before she took his open hand and they walked towards the history of magic classroom.

It would have been asking for too much to think that they could make it to class with no difficulties as they rounded the last corner on the way to the class and ran into Draco Malfoy complete with a shiny badge with an I on it and his adornment Pansy Parkinson with the same badge. Draco sneered and said, "Watch it Scarhead or I'll have to give you and your mudblood a detention for accosting a member of the inquisitorial squad."

Harry bit off a retort on his own and merely looked at the pair dismissively as though they weren't worth his time which in truth was the case, before he said, "I apologize Mr. Malfoy and Ms. Parkinson I am afraid my pureblood radar must be a bit off. I've been having this problem ever since I figured out Voldemort is a half-blood like me and yet I wonder why a bunch of purebloods who think they bow to no one, bow to him. Ah well, I guess it'll remain one of life's little mysteries for a little while longer."

Harry and Hermione left the gob smacked pair behind as Hermione had a look on her face of awe and appreciation before she said, "Harry, I don't think I've ever seen someone shut two people up more

than that. That was, in a word, brilliant; or as our former best friend would say, brilliant but scary.”

Harry laughed and replied, “I think the truth has that effect on some people.” Harry then grew serious and rather cold when he said, “I hate how they call you mudblood and I know it bothers you even if you say it doesn’t. I was called freak for 13 years so I know how it feels having a name ingrained into you and not understand why. Just so you know love, I won’t stop fighting until the day comes where the phrase muggleborn is worn with pride and not with any of the other shame or pity that comes with it now. I promise you that.”

Hermione listened to Harry’s impassioned proclamation and for the first time she could feel the power and magic that Harry now possessed and had begin to unleash. It was an amazing experience that only could be compared to the first time she met Dumbledore. The power made those around it feel scared and yet safe at the same time. Scared because of the great power he exuded and safe because of the person in control of the power. She softly said, “Thank you Harry, your words and love mean everything to me.” Harry merely smiled and nodded as they finally reached the history of magic classroom with 5 minutes to spare.

Professor Binns was floating aimlessly much like he had been the first time they walked into the room. Hermione spotted a table at the front that was still empty and they sat down still and pulled out the parchment and quills.

Binns spent the majority of the time doing a comprehensive review from the previous year while Harry napped as Hermione remained the only one who supplemented her notes with what Binns provided. Of course, by the end of the class even Hermione’s eye lids were getting a bit heavy. She shook Harry awake just as Binns dismissed the class.

Hermione tried to scold Harry but she was hard pressed to criticize him too much given that Harry had worked so far ahead in the class, and unlike some other students she knew he didn’t really miss anything. Harry had the still half awake look spread across his face which Hermione didn’t get to see often because he was usually the

first one up during the summer at Grimmauld as they exited the classroom. Hermione found it to be adorable and was giggling as Harry shook the cobwebs loose. Unfortunately as the exchange occurred, Umbridge decided to make an appearance and say, "Mr. Potter I have been informed that you ran into Mr. Malfoy and Ms. Parkinson in the hall. Mr. Malfoy informs me it was an intentional attempt to injure him by saying that the Dark Lord has returned when the ministry has consistently insisted that is not the case. Do you have anything to refute his statement?"

Harry looked at Umbridge incredulously said, "You aren't truly serious are you ma'am? I was in the graveyard as I watched him regain his body. That is where I captured Pettigrew. Not in some hair brained assassination attempt that the minister concocted to serve his own interests."

Umbridge looked like Harry had punched her in the stomach before she collected herself and said, "Very well you half-blooded little cretin. You have detention tonight with me and I will lodge a complaint to have your prefect badge pulled. See you in class Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger." Umbridge finished her rant as a hateful glee spread across her face.

Harry sighed and ran his hands through his hair; he took a seat at the next available bench as Hermione joined him. He looked at his girlfriend and said, "This is ridiculous Hermione. I didn't say one thing that could be construed as false or disrespectful to her and yet here I am serving detention with threat of my position being pulled. This is going to be a long year."

Hermione looked sadly at Harry and said, "I'll talk to the headmaster tonight after remedial potions. I am sure you'll keep your position and you just have to make sure not to say anything else to Umbridge. You need to promise me Harry, because it won't do me any good being a prefect if you're not around to spend it with."

Harry nodded slowly even grudgingly as Hermione stood and took his hand. Harry looked at his watch and realized they needed to start towards the dungeon for potions with Snape which was sure to be a treat. They ran into Ron and Neville who looked like they were ready

to go before the firing squad. Neville looked at Harry and said, "I heard Umbridge gave you a detention tonight for telling the truth." Harry nodded and Neville shook his head before he said, "Don't let her get to you Harry or it is going to be a long year." Harry nodded again as they reached the dungeon prepared for another year with Snape.

They entered the classroom to find they were once again stuck with Slytherin for the class although thankfully Malfoy was nowhere to be seen thanks to his actions the previous year. Snape eyed everyone as they entered and Harry made eye contact with the potions master in a figurative pissing match of his Occlumency skills against Snape's legilimency skills. Harry easily blocked the attempt and Snape arched his eyebrow as a tip of the cap before Harry smugly sat down with Hermione and Neville in the front.

Snape began, "This is your OWL level Potions course. I expect that next year at this time very few of you will remain to take the N.E.W.T equivalent of this course. This year we will be brewing several complex potions and I expect your theory as well as potion brewing skills to be adequate or you will be removed from the course. This week we will be brewing the draught of peace. Fortunately for all of you dunderheads it will take the course of both periods to brew because it must sit for a minimum of 48 hours in between steps. Follow the directions in your book after you gather the necessary ingredients from the front."

The remainder of the class Harry and Hermione followed the instructions that Snape set forth and despite his constant criticisms they both had the proper form of the potion when they had finished. Snape looked impressed at the pair while he looked woefully at Ron's attempt which was even worse than Neville's potion.

Hermione practically bounded out of the room with excitement as she giggled and said, "Oh Harry you did so well today. I think we had the two best potions in the class. Even Professor Snape looked pleased."

Harry smiled and replied, "Yeah I found it easier to concentrate today than I have in the past. But now I wonder, what we'll be doing in remedial tonight?"

Hermione shrugged and replied, "I don't know, to tell you the truth Harry. I have been thinking that I should probably learn Occlumency though. Maybe we can spend the time working on that." Harry nodded his agreement as they made their way to the great hall for lunch.

During lunch Harry shared a brief legilimens massage with Dumbledore showing his memory from the morning with Umbridge. All he received from the headmaster in return was a simple don't worry. Ancient Runes was rather simple as they discussed what new material they would be learning for the year and also reviewed some basic material from the previous two years of the course. Harry enjoyed the temporary respite the class provided because he knew that their next class was with Umbridge and Harry had already gotten a detention before the first class occurred.

Harry and Hermione entered the same classroom that had harbored a man who was possessed, an egotistical nitwit, a werewolf who turned out to be as close to Harry as an uncle, a deatheater impostor, and now Harry somehow felt this year would be the worst with Umbridge.

Harry took a seat next to Hermione in the middle of the room and pulled out his supplies as Hermione did the same. Neville and Parvati sat behind them and Neville whispered to Harry, "Harry, just keep your cool and eventually she'll move on to the next target. I know for a fact that there are more enticing targets than you and your order of Merlin, so just hang in there." Harry nodded and turned his attention back to the front as Umbridge began her lecture.

"Hem, Hem this is Defense Against the Dark Arts for your OWL year of review. I have reviewed your previous instructor's notes and have determined that the practical portion of this course must be neglected in order to catch you up on the theory of the discipline. Open your books to page 12." Umbridge spoke in a sickly sweet tone that contrasted with her rather caustic appearance. The entire class was a waste of time as Harry and Hermione began finalizing plans for the DA.

After dinner they made their way back to the dungeons to see what Snape had planned for them in remedial potions. They entered the room to find the normally intimidating potions master sitting in a button up shirt and jeans. He glanced at them upon his arrival and shut the door behind them and he casted a privacy charm before he gestured them up to the front of the class.

Snape spoke softly and said, "Well seeing as you both did everything perfectly today in class; Albus suggested I teach Ms. Granger Occlumency with Mr. Potter's help. If you continue to perform as well in class as today, we might work on some advanced potions some weeks and we might just sit and talk. As much as it may seem to the contrary, I do not hate either of you and actually have a certain appreciation for you methods. That notwithstanding, I hear that Mr. Potter has riled up Umbridge this morning and has detention following this class."

Harry nodded and Snape continued, "I must agree with Albus when he says that it is not wise to stir up trouble this year Mr. Potter. Umbridge and Fudge bring a different kind of danger than the Dark Lord; it would do you good to understand the difference." Harry nodded and Snape summoned a pair of chairs before he motioned them to sit down. Snape looked at Hermione and simply said, "Occlumency is the art of shielding your mind from unexpected intrusion. Therefore Mr. Potter and I will help you build your defenses and then we will force you to practice some of Moody's mantra in its application."

After a half an hour of battering her rudimentary defenses, Hermione and Harry were dismissed by Snape with a respectful nod. Hermione looked at Harry with a pained expression and quietly asked, "How did you pick this up so fast, especially without someone testing you?"

Harry made a small smile and replied, "Hermione I had a constant presence in my mind all year thanks to the scar. It was kind a sink or float kind of thing, and I thankfully floated." Hermione nodded somewhat sheepishly before they parted as Harry went to the DADA classroom for his detention with Umbridge.

As Harry began his detention with Umbridge, Hermione was filling out paperwork for S.P.E.W. and for its reinstatement as a student organization under the new educational decree.

Hermione figured that if Umbridge wanted a war then she and Harry would give her one. But, she was going to use guerilla tactics to bring down the vile woman instead of direct attacks and that would begin by bringing S.P.E.W. back with a vengeance. Hermione also was working on a loyalty oath and some charmed parchment to ensure to sanctity of the DA from Umbridge's machinations.

Harry's detention with Umbridge started off harmlessly enough as the toad said, "Mr. Potter because you insist on telling lies that harm the ministry and the sanctity of the pureblood race, I want you to write lines for the next two hours. You will write, 'I must not tell lies repeatedly.'"

Harry pulled out his quill prepared for a rather easy detention until Umbridge put her hand up and said, "No, not your quill Mr. Potter. As a consequence of your actions you will write with this quill."

Harry looked at the long thin black quill with a sharp tip and it appeared to be a normal quill as he began to write. As soon as the quill moved on the paper Harry felt a sting on the top of his hand. He looked down on his hand and he could see the back of his hand taking on the tell tale loopy handwriting he had grown accustomed to writing with in the past as it peeled the flesh away. The pain was not mind numbing as say perhaps the cruciatus curse but it was painful nonetheless. Harry continued to write his lines, grimacing occasionally as the quill was continually filled with his own blood from the back of his hand.

Umbridge would cackle occasionally as she watched Harry continue his terrible detention. Harry could tell that as he continued, the cuts were continually getting deeper in the back of his hand, until he was all but certain that, no amount of magic could remove the scars that would surely follow. As Harry wrote he vowed to himself that he would not have another detention with the woman and that he would make her pay for his cruel punishment.

As Harry finished his two hours, Umbridge made a sickly sweet smile and said, "Well Mr. Potter I hope this drills the message that half-bloods, like you, should avoid the countenance of a proud pureblood like Mr. Malfoy all together, and that spreading lies about ministry business will be dealt with similarly in the future. I wouldn't suggest that you go to the hospital wing or I might find a reason to have you in here again tomorrow night. Now leave and go back to your precious little mudblood that you care so much for."

Harry sighed and grabbed his bag with his left hand. Harry was sure he looked terrible as two straight hours of such pain tended to take a toll. He slowly made his way back to Gryffindor tower and as he approached the fat lady she took one look at him and began crying about her poor little lion she let him in without a password. Harry entered the mostly empty common room and found Hermione curled up in her favorite chair reading a book somewhat distractedly.

Hermione caught Harry's entrance into the room and was shocked at how pale and tired he looked. She jumped out of her chair and ran towards Harry grabbing his right hand.

Harry let out a hiss, and when she looked down at his hand tears of sadness and fury consumed her. She gently took his hand making sure to not touch the cuts before she sniffled and asked, "Harry this looks like a blood quill was used on you. Love, please tell me what happened, and then I can get you something to help with it. I assume she threatened you if you got it properly treated?" Harry nodded and she continued, "and with cuts this deep a healing charm won't work." Hermione frowned for a moment in frustration before Harry began to talk and her curiosity overwhelmed her frustration for the moment.

Harry then recapped everything that happened during the detention as Hermione's expressions on her face shifted from angry, to sad, and finally to determined. She quietly went to her room and rummaged through her surplus potions stores she had collected over the years, and found what she was looking for with a small tube of murtlap essence which would heal the cuts.

Hermione returned to find Harry shivering in the chair by the fire and once again she vowed to make the person responsible for Harry's

pain pay. She gently placed the salve on Harry's cuts and watched as they slowly healed and soothed the inflamed area on his hand.

Harry looked at Hermione with gratitude and softly said, "Thanks 'Mione it already feels a lot better than it did." Hermione smiled slightly before she finished applying the salve, finally content that he would be well enough tomorrow to attend class in good health.

After they talked for a little while, and watched as Harry's hand healed, the healed cuts left behind smooth white scars that read I must not tell lies. They were determined to organize the DA and handle the logistics of the group before the end of September. Umbridge was going to pay.

A/N: Please review. The story continues on as Harry has already been given the detention from hell on the first day. Keep reading and reviewing because Voldemort makes a move soon and how will Harry and Hermione deal with it?

Chapter 20

The next few days went quickly as Harry had met with Dumbledore about the room, which Dumbledore wistfully referred to as the room of requirements. Harry had to steer the headmaster back to the task at hand after Dumbledore began talking about some of the times he used the room as student. Dumbledore then performed the necessary spell with help from the castle and then Harry showed him the back of his right hand and the scars on it.

Harry had only seen the headmaster even remotely angry once before and that was third year when Fudge was being unreasonable about Sirius and had ordered he be given the kiss without the benefit of a trial once again. This time however, Harry could feel the hairs on his arms and on the back of his neck stand on end much like how he felt after the horcrux had been removed from his scar. Dumbledore simply said, "I will not tolerate and such further behavior from that woman or I will be having a long overdue conversation with the minister. Harry, I wish for you to have the DA to be meeting by the end of the month with only those people you deem trustworthy." Harry nodded his acceptance and just like that he was dismissed as his mission for the year came into focus.

Hermione had spent the first week devising a way to ensure the loyalty of members and to announce meetings randomly, due to the increased presence of the inquisitorial squad. Hermione had come up with a particularly brilliant idea of using the same protean charm that the dark mark was based upon, but hers used the variation on a medallion that was spelled to show the specific time and date of the meeting in the room.

Ron had been reasonably pleasant the first few days of class and even engaged Harry in a few conversations about the coming Quidditch season and his competition for the keeper position. Harry was slowly growing comfortable with Ron's presence, if as nothing more than someone to talk to Quidditch about.

Friday morning of the first week found Harry and Hermione in the great hall enjoying a quiet and companionable breakfast. Several girls

had made their increased interest in Harry known as Harry refused to be drawn to the bait, much to Hermione's delight. Similarly most of the Ravenclaw boys found a new pastime in staring at Hermione, because of her rare combination of brains and beauty. Harry noticed Terry Boot looking particularly hard at Hermione much to his consternation, and he protested his entrance into the DA. Hermione begrudgingly agreed to Harry's request, after Harry conceded that Ginny couldn't join the group for the same reason. They were summarily replaced by another fifth year Ravenclaw Mathias Stern who Hermione vouched for from her Arithmancy class, leaving the same split of the houses as before, with Seamus taking Ginny's spot.

After breakfast the young couple decided to retreat to the peace and quiet of the library. Hermione had been steadfast in sticking to their study planner and through the first week, Harry had been easily up to the task, and he even found the time to steal a few snogs from Hermione in the back of the library. After his detention, Harry was careful to avoid the squad and Umbridge at all turns, and he even managed to help Hermione out of a jam one night by using the marauder's map.

As they sat in the library working on their OWL revisions Harry looked at Hermione and pondered aloud, "Have you thought about what you want to do, when you finish school?"

Hermione looked up at Harry and chewed on the end of her quill for a moment before she said, "I guess I haven't really thought too much about it yet. How about you Harry?"

"I was thinking about maybe getting a job as a curse breaker for Gringott's. I had thought that I wanted to be an auror like mum and dad but I don't think I'd like to work for something as arbitrary as the ministry. I mean over the course of the last year their direction has shifted multiple times. At least at Gringott's I'd know where I stand." Harry rambled.

Hermione mused, "Of course, it's not like you would need to get a job out of school anyways love. The only reason you should work is if it is doing something that makes you happy."

Harry smiled and nodded before he teased, "I don't think I could just sit around and count my galleons though, and I am certain you couldn't either. Come on, you have to have at least some ideas about what you would like to do after we graduate."

Hermione sighed and replied, "Well I figured for the longest time you would want to become an auror, because you were strongest in that area in school, and that I would be your partner. However, this past year with my tutoring sessions, I've been thinking more and more, and I've decided that I would like to teach here at Hogwarts, although the job as a curse breaker does sound pretty interesting. Maybe we should ask Bill for some information on the position, just so we know." Harry nodded and they returned to their studying.

By 5:30 they had returned to the common room and then had grabbed some dinner before they were to start their first rounds as prefects. Hermione was extremely excited at the prospect of doing patrols with Harry and she even suggested they bring the map to maybe sneak a snog towards the end of their patrol.

As they patrolled they soon realized why they had gotten the Friday night patrol because it was obvious that most couples tried to sneak out and snog in the various broom closets of the castle or few adventurous couples tried the Astronomy tower out. Harry and Hermione let all of them off with warnings but indicated they would only get one warning before points would start coming off. Harry mused aloud, "I think I'd sacrifice some house points for some quality time with you, love."

Hermione giggled and replied, "Yes dear, but with the map I think we can share that time and not lose any points."

Harry smiled crookedly and said, "That my dear, is a brilliant idea." Harry wrapped his arm around Hermione's shoulder as she continued to giggle.

After they finished their rounds they did find a nice nook on the third floor and got some quality snogging in, before Hermione reluctantly broke it up and told Harry they needed to get back. Thanks to the map they were able to avoid an ambush on their way back to the

common room. Once they got back to the safety of Gryffindor tower they shared one more snog before going to bed.

That night Harry had a forced Voldemort vision, as he watched Voldemort and a couple of death eaters outside of a house that looked like Hermione's. He was awoken before the vision ended however as Neville shook him awake. Harry grabbed his cloak and the marauder's map, and he headed out in a sprint for Dumbledore's office hoping to save the Grangers before it was too late.

Harry made it to Dumbledore's office without running into Filch or Umbridge and her cronies and the gargoyles slid aside without a password. Harry found Dumbledore sitting at his desk in a discussion with Fawkes. Albus looked up alarmed at Harry who was still in his pajamas. Harry gasped out, "Professor, I had a vision, Voldemort was at Hermione's parents house."

Dumbledore looked gravely at Harry for a moment before he whispered something to Fawkes who vanished with a flash of fire. Dumbledore stood and grasped Harry's shoulder gently and said, "Harry, we had order members guarding their house and they were to raise an alarm so that David and Elizabeth could portkey to Black Manor. I have discussed the many scenarios of living there with them, and they have agreed to stay until a time came when it was safe to return to their house."

Just then, Fawkes reappeared with a piece of parchment in his talons, which upon reading it Albus smiled and said, "Harry the Grangers made it safely to Black Manor and no one was harmed. Their house has sustained some damage but it appears all of their personal belongings will be salvaged. Try to get some sleep Harry, and I will inform Ms. Granger of this tomorrow morning if you do not first."

Harry wearily returned to the common room and slumped down on the couch. He looked into the fire as his adrenalin began to ebb and eventually drifted off to sleep.

Hermione had gotten up early, in order to have some time to herself on Saturday morning. She enjoyed spending time with Harry a lot, but she had spent most of her life doing things alone and missed the comfort that her solitude brought. She grabbed a book she had been

reading all summer when she would get bored, and made her way down to the common room in her pajama pants and spaghetti strap top.

The bushy haired witch made it down to her favorite chair in the common room, when she noticed someone had fallen asleep on the couch. When she went to wake the person she noticed it was Harry, and he was in a right state shivering and pale. Hermione wanted to panic, but she decided that based upon his appearance ,Harry wasn't in any real pain, although he appeared uncomfortable, so she shook him awake.

Harry's eyes shot open and they were extremely blood shot, before he recognized who was standing above him. He immediately pulled Hermione into a desperate hug and said, "I tried to stay up because I had to tell you."

Hermione rubbed his back and then whispered into his ear, "Tell me what, Harry?"

Harry broke the hug and patted the spot next to him on the couch. Hermione sat down next to Harry with a concerned look on her face, before Harry took a deep breath and softly said, "I had a vision last night. Voldemort forced a vision to me somehow. I really didn't think it was possible anymore without the horcrux, but he was outside your house." Harry looked pensive for a moment before he continued.

"Neville shook me awake and I ran to the headmaster's office. I ran into his office and told him what I had seen in the vision. He sent Fawkes to find out how your parents were doing. Fawkes came back and had a note that said that your parents have been relocated to Black Manor, until it was safe to leave again; he said your house was damaged but not seriously. I had to tell you first, just so you wouldn't worry too much, and I guess I fell asleep on the couch." Harry finished speaking very quickly.

Hermione took a breath and gave Harry a hug before she said, "Harry, we both knew that this might happen and my parents did too. I'm just glad that they are safe, and to a lesser extent that our house is fine." Hermione kissed Harry gently on the lips before she continued, "Thank you for warning the headmaster." Harry nodded then yawned.

Hermione smiled and said, "Why don't you go upstairs and take a nap, and I'll get you up in a few hours." Harry nodded and gave Hermione a kiss on the cheek, before he staggered up to his room.

Hermione sighed and decided to read her book and then wake Harry up in a few hours. Before Hermione realized it the common room had filled up with early risers, she glanced at the clock in the common room and realized she had been reading for two hours. She smiled to herself and elected to let Harry sleep a little longer before she would wake him up. Hermione was broken from her readings when she heard a feminine voice clear their throat to get her attention. Hermione pulled her book away from in front of her face, and she wasn't surprised to see Ginny Weasley standing there looking very anxious. Hermione arched her eyebrow and softly said, "What can I help you with, Ginny?"

Ginny pulled her wand out and before Hermione could do anything she cast *imperius* much to Hermione's surprise. Little did Hermione know that Ginny's first year and her possession by Tom Riddle's diary, led her to discover how to use unforgivables at a very early age. Ginny commanded, "I order you to go and break up with Harry."

Hermione was in a haze as she struggled against Ginny's voice, as it very persuasively ordered her to break up with Harry. However, thanks to her cursory Occlumency training, she was able to block some of the spell as she fought for control of her body. Finally, Hermione threw the spell off, which shocked Ginny, before Hermione snatched Ginny's wand from her hand, and coolly said, "That was a very stupid thing to do Ginny. Surely you know that just for casting that on me, your wand will be snapped and you'll be very lucky to avoid Azkaban as a minor."

Ginny gulped as she paled, before she dropped to her knees and pleaded, "Oh Hermione, please don't tell anyone that I did this. It's just that my mum wanted me to get together with Harry so much, and I didn't want to disappoint her. I promise I'll stop trying to get Harry, just don't turn me in." Ginny was in tears and was shaking with fear, which given her situation, was entirely warranted.

Hermione hedged her bets and simply said, "Harry got a pensieve this summer and it's up in his trunk. I am going to take this memory and put it there. If you stay true to your word I'll never tell anyone about this except for Harry and I'll leave it up to him for your punishment. As it was, he already didn't trust you, and the little trust I had for you is gone. I hope you are happy with yourself. I'll give you your wand back when and only when Harry agrees with my punishment." Ginny looked very shamed as she merely shook her head sadly, and went back up to her dorm.

Hermione couldn't believe how her day was going, so she decided to wake up Harry and sort everything out including Ginny and her betrayal. As she made her way up to Harry's room she began assessing the threat of anything similar happening in the future and the means of how that could occur. The means of controlling a wizard were rather limited in their scope and included *imperius* and love potions. Fortunately, she determined that the effects of a love potion were rather easy to spot but hard to reverse. Hermione immediately decided that she needed to research means to counteract love potions and to have a supply on hand or a preventative in effect for herself and Harry in case either was slipped one.

Hermione found Harry and the rest of the fifth year boys still soundly asleep and quiet, aside from Ron's snores, as she snuck over to Harry's bed and shook him gently. Harry opened his eyes partially and had a small smile on his face as he yawned and said, "Morning love, time to get started for the day?" Hermione nodded and Harry rolled out of bed. With a wave of his hand his bed was remade, as Hermione's jaw hit the floor.

Harry smirked and said, "What, haven't you seen any wandless magic before?"

Hermione recovered and replied, "Actually yes I have, but it has always been Dumbledore doing it before."

Harry smiled and savored the rare opportunity to teach Hermione something, before he said, "Well every witch or wizard can do wandless magic, it's just a matter of being able to control it. I'm sure you have done some before in the past and didn't even realize it. The

key to wandless magic is intent and will, unlike regular wand magic, where there is an incantation and wand movement. Basically, you must will your magic to do what you want.”

Hermione nodded absently as she was on a new train of thought, before she snapped back to the task at hand and quietly said, “We need to discuss some new developments Harry, and I need to use your pensieve for it ok?” Harry nodded as he opened his trunk and pulled out his small solicitor’s pensieve that he had purchased early on in the summer.

Hermione pulled out a long silvery thread and placed it into the pensieve before she shrunk it and placed it in her pocket. She softly said, “Let’s grab our notes for some revision and after breakfast we can work on that and the memory I just placed in the pensieve. You’ll find it rather interesting.”

After a quiet early breakfast Harry and Hermione found themselves alone in the back of the library. Hermione resized the pensieve and said, “Ok I need you to promise that no matter what you see in this memory that you listen to me before you run off and do something. Do you promise?” Harry nodded hesitantly as Hermione took the one memory in the small bowl and swirled it around before she took Harry’s hand and they each dunked their heads going into the memory.

Harry watched in amusement as Hermione absently read her book. Harry then watched in confusion as Ginny got Hermione’s attention. Harry then watched in horror and then rage as Ginny tried to cast *imperio* on Hermione. Finally, Harry watched in admiration and pride as Hermione threw the curse off and then threatened Ginny with Azkaban if she ever tried something again.

They pulled themselves out of the memory and Harry could only think to hug Hermione tightly as she wiped away the tears that didn’t fall earlier. Finally, when the tears began to subside Harry softly said, “I think we should turn her in Hermione. Anyone who can use an unforgivable as carelessly and cavalier as she did, needs professional help.”

Hermione sighed and replied, "Yes Harry, you're right. Maybe Dumbledore can do something for her so that she can still stay in school. I just can't believe she could do something like that."

Harry nodded absently as he rubbed Hermione's back gently to gain comfort for himself as much as her. Harry finally said, "I think we need to be prepared for similar attacks in the future. We can both throw off the *imperius* curse, but what other means of mind control can be used?"

Hermione smiled despite herself and the situation and replied, "I was thinking about that this morning after the attack, and I think we need to be prepared for love potions; especially, for you love." Harry nodded as Hermione continued, "On a different tangent, how is it possible for Voldemort to force a vision on you without the connection anymore?"

Harry sighed and replied, "The only thing I can think of is that there remains some residual after effect of the horcrux. It's like I can only feel it when an extremely strong surge of hate comes from him. I think it might serve as some sort of an alert for an impending attack in the future but that's about it." Hermione nodded thoughtfully before she broke the hug and gave Harry a peck on the cheek as she sat down to do some revisions with Harry.

They worked on their revisions for a few hours before Harry dragged Hermione reluctantly out of the library, and up to the headmaster's office. The gargoyle slid away after Harry uttered *Jolly Rancher* as they entered Dumbledore's office. He was sitting at his desk reading a book as he glanced up over his glasses and saw Harry and Hermione enter the office.

Dumbledore smiled and said, "Ah Harry, Hermione I assume this is about the attack last night."

Hermione shook her head and replied, "No sir, Harry has already told me about that. This is about an incident that occurred this morning. I have a memory stored in Harry's pensieve that I would like you to see. We would like your input on what we should do about it." Dumbledore nodded pensively as he along with the other two relived Hermione's memory of the morning once again.

As they were pulled out of the memory once again, Dumbledore looked at them with rather angry expression and said, "I believe I need to have a talk with Ms. Weasley and her parents later today. Harry, Hermione I will send word to both of you when I have determined a proper punishment, and it will hinge on Hermione's final approval. For now enjoy the rest of your day, perhaps a walk around the lake will sooth your nerves." Harry and Hermione nodded and left the office trying to distance themselves from the problems of the day as much as possible.

A/N: Please Review. Next chapter is a continuation of this one as we find out Ginny's unforgivable punishment and also Quidditch tryouts. Will Ron make the team?

Chapter 21

As Harry and Hermione took a much needed walk around the lake talking, holding hands, and snogging along the way to ease the tension of the day; Dumbledore was organizing a meeting that would determine Ginny Weasley's future. A quick floo call to the burrow and the meeting was set for 5 pm in his office. He watched the memory several more times to find some reason that Ginny Weasley went wrong and it kept coming back to her possession by Tom Riddle. Evidently it left more scars than he had originally thought and it even might have skewed the young girl's moral compass. He summoned Minerva to have her bring Ginny to a meeting at 5 pm. When she asked him what it was about he merely sighed and replied, "I am afraid that will have to wait until the meeting."

Back at the burrow Molly was certain they had a special order meeting so she flooed the ministry and told Arthur they had a meeting with Albus about something at 5 pm. Arthur arrived back at the Burrow at 4:30 to be greeted by Molly with some early dinner and a kiss. Molly regaled her husband with the news that Ron and Ginny would be trying out for Quidditch the next week and then maybe they could have 4 of their children on the team at the same time.

They took the floo to Albus' office and were pleasantly surprised to see Ginny waiting for them. What they weren't expecting was Albus' stern expression as he tersely motioned them to their seats. Molly and Arthur glanced at Ginny who was looking down at her feet as she stood next to Minerva McGonagall.

Dumbledore said, "Molly, Arthur I am afraid this isn't a pleasant meeting I have summoned you for today. I would like for you to join me over at my pensieve for a very unpleasant memory involving young Ginevra." They all stood and walked over to the pensieve. Minerva and Ginny also joined in as they entered the memory.

They all stood in rapt attention as it appeared Hermione was reading a book. Molly asked, "Albus what does this have to do with Ginny?" Dumbledore merely motioned for them to keep watching.

Next, Ginny walked down into the common room just as the last few people present headed off to breakfast. Ginny looked around the room almost triumphantly as she pulled out her wand and walked towards Hermione. Arthur asked concernedly to both Ginny and Albus, "Did she hurt Hermione?" Albus merely shook his head while Ginny remained silent. They continued to watch as Ginny cleared her throat and got Hermione's attention.

Minerva watched with dread assuming that Ginny had accosted her favorite student in some horrid manner, and that she would have to visit the hospital wing after the meeting. Then they all watched as Hermione asked Ginny if she could help her with something. Then *it* happened. Molly and Arthur watched in shame and horror as their youngest child casted *imperio* on a girl they considered a surrogate daughter. They continued to watch in shock as Hermione threw the curse off that was ordering her to breakup with Harry. Minerva began to grow disgusted as she watched Ginny grovel and plead for Hermione not to tell anyone and then she blamed everyone but herself for her actions. Minerva had never felt more shame for one of her own students before and it had only been equaled when she found out about Peter Pettigrew's betrayal of the Potters.

They pulled out of the memory as everyone was seated again. Dumbledore spoke with conviction as he said, "Arthur, Molly your daughter has committed a grave offense that would normally result in her wand being snapped and a long stay in Azkaban. This action in conjunction with your son Ronald's actions last year against both Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger have me seriously questioning how you have parented your youngest children. All of your other children have been productive and helpful members of the Hogwarts community during their stay. Even your twins, who have broken their share of rules while here, have brought laughter to the halls of the school the likes of which have rarely been seen. Even Ronald and Ginevra were both exemplary students until last year. Do you have any idea why that might be?"

Just as Dumbledore finished Umbridge came waddling up the stairs. Dumbledore simply said, "Delores, I am currently in a meeting, would you come back in an hour and we can speak then?" Umbridge

growled but did as asked as she walked away muttering something about blood traitors and cretins.

Dumbledore continued with none of the normal twinkle in his eyes, "It was actually a rhetorical question so feel no need to bother to answer. While Ronald appears to be returning to his excellent behavior this year Ginny has committed, as I said, a grievous offense. But, she might be fortunate in her punishment yet. Due to the fact that no other witnesses were present to see the crime, Ms. Granger controls your daughter's fate and to lesser extent I suppose Mr. Potter does as well. I do not wish either of you to attempt to coerce a decision out of either of these young people, but I wish you to be here as silent observers. I have summoned both of them and they will determine the next course of action for Ginevra. As headmaster of this school I guarantee she will be punished to the extent of our abilities but Ms. Granger and Mr. Potter will determine if her actions warrant a stay in Azkaban." Molly gasped as Arthur looked at his daughter with shame and anger in his eyes.

Ginny was still stubbornly looking at the ground until McGonagall simply said, "Albus, even if Ms. Granger and Mr. Potter allow her to stay at our school I refuse to call her a Gryffindor anymore, and I hereby revoke her house membership." Molly began weeping as Ginny finally looked up looked at her mother with concern and regret.

Harry and Hermione entered the office as Harry sighed and Hermione latched onto his hand with a death grip. Arthur stood and said, "Harry, Hermione I want to apologize on behalf of Ginevra and to say that any punishment you deem fit our family, will support and will not hold any grudges against you." Molly was too busy weeping to nod her assent as Harry and Hermione looked up at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore softly said, "Hermione, you have ultimate say in Ms. Weasley's punishment because there were no other witnesses to the crime. Minerva and I have already ensured she will be punished to the full extent of Hogwarts and that she will be ejected from Gryffindor house for her actions. She will, of course be resorted, after her actions have been documented before the school. The law is quite clear on this."

Harry looked at Hermione, who was shaking slightly and beginning to tear up, before he wrapped her up into a hug and whispered in her ear, "Mione I know you don't want her to go to Azkaban, so why don't we just stipulate she is allowed no magic during the summers and she'll be put on probation for the next ten years. I think that will be enough to get her back on the right track." Hermione sniffed and nodded against Harry.

Hermione broke the hug and softly said, "I don't want her to go to Azkaban."

Molly wailed, "Oh thank god."

Hermione continued, "But, I do want her magical rights suspended during the summers. That means no magical books, objects, or wand at all for the rest of her time at Hogwarts during the summer. Finally, I want her placed on probation for the next ten years, and if she is caught doing something similar she be placed in Azkaban for this as well."

Dumbledore softly said, "As head of the Wizengamot, I accept your terms, and they will be enforced to the full extent of the law. I apologize once again for the simple truth that, Hogwarts has failed to protect both of you as much as it should have. Mr. Potter your injuries will be dealt with at a later time. Please go and have a relaxing night. I recommend you both take the day off tomorrow to recuperate from your long first week. I assure both of you that it can only get better."

Harry and Hermione managed faint smiles as Minerva followed them out of the office, she was eager to find out what had happened to Harry earlier in the week. Minerva caught them as they were about to pass the gargoyle as she said, "Mr. Potter would you care to divulge to me what has happened to you this week?"

Harry sighed and showed her the back of his hand. Minerva gasped and weakly said, "T-this is the work of a blood quill correct?" Harry nodded before she continued, "Oh she wouldn't, not even her, not on children."

Harry sighed and replied, "Yes it was Umbridge after she gave me a detention for telling her that Voldemort was back. I used the blood

quill for two hours and she told me if I reported it or went to the hospital wing I would have detention the next night too. Fortunately, Hermione had some murtlap essence to heal the cuts and I have been keeping a low profile since then.”

Minerva nodded as her face lit up with fury, “Harry, Hermione I feel that I have failed you both far too many times in the past. I will make it up to you if only because I will protect you from Umbridge the rest of the year. For every unjust detention she gives to one of mine, I will give to one of her brats. I promise both of you that I won’t play by the rules anymore if she won’t.” Harry and Hermione gave her the same faint smiles they had managed earlier, and left the stairwell hand in hand on their way back to Gryffindor tower.

The fall out from Ginny Weasley’s attempted betrayal was swift as she was resorted into Slytherin of all places which went over quite well with Ron. Every single Weasley sent letters of apology to both Harry and Hermione and the girls of Gryffindor made vows to protect Harry and Hermione from the girls of the other houses who would undoubtedly try their own plots in time.

The second week of classes were blissfully quiet as the school slowly quieted in the Ginny Weasley story and soon began focusing on Quidditch tryout for the house teams. Gryffindor’s house team was in need of its first new keeper in 5 years due to Oliver Wood’s graduation. One chaser position was up for grabs also as various Gryffindor’s tried their hands at making the house team. Harry took advantage of the tryouts to hover on his broom by the stands and talk with Hermione as they watched Ron tryout for keeper.

Harry and Hermione were feeling much better than they had even a week before as they worked ahead in their classes and kept on schedule with their revisions. As Harry hovered on his broom he said to his love, “Hermione do you think Ron will make the team?”

Hermione sighed and replied, “I think it would be good for Ron if he did. I know he doesn’t have much self confidence and I think this can only help that. Maybe he can even get a girlfriend who can train him to behave properly.” Harry laughed loudly as Hermione giggled at the piece of information. A few second years trying out looked up at the

couple but quickly averted their eyes when Harry glared down at them.

They watched as the Chasers tried out first and a sixth year named Cormac McLaggen, who Hermione described as slimy for a Gryffindor won the chaser position alongside Katie and Angelina. Harry mused, "I am pretty sure that would have been Ginny's spot if she hadn't been so stupid." Hermione growled her agreement as the chasers were dismissed and keeper practice began.

Ron went first and even Harry had to admit that Ron would be a capable keeper as he made a variety of saves and used his Cleansweep broom to its maximum efficiency. Katie glanced up at Harry as he gave a thumb up in accordance with her own approval. Katie had figured out that Harry had turned down the captaincy and was determined to have him help her as much as possible as a thanks for her position.

Surprisingly, Colin Creevy went next and did just as well as Ron did although when he was asked to describe some of the formations that chasers and beaters were needed at he merely shrugged his shoulders. Ron had answered the question with many of his favorite Cannon's formations and after a couple more non-descript third years tried out it was decided that Ron would be the keeper as Colin was kept on as the reserve keeper and eventual replacement for Ron.

Following the tryouts there was an impromptu party held in Gryffindor tower, as Ron regaled Lavender and Parvati with stories of his long and storied Quidditch career. Harry and Hermione didn't have the heart to end the party because they were content to let Ron have his moment as long as no one drank too many of the butterbeers the twins supplied for their brother's party.

Ron stood up and walked over towards Harry and slurred, "H-harry, Mermione I just wanted to say sorry for last year, I was a prat. I really miss you guys."

Harry humored his intoxicated friend and simply said, "Yes you were a prat Ron." Hermione giggled as Ron staggered slightly.

After he regained his balance Ron smiled, apparently satisfied with both Harry's response and staying on his feet as he returned to his adoring fans.

Harry nuzzled into Hermione's neck as she gasped and then giggled before Harry said, "You know, I do miss Ron from time to time. But, the good times just didn't seem to outweigh the bad when we were with him. I think our dynamic with him was just not right. I hope he can strike out on his own and we can still have our friend, even if he's not our best friend anymore."

Hermione nodded with a pretty smile on her face before she said, "Yes Harry, I think Ron always felt a little trapped by your fame and last year he finally had enough. He just needed a little longer to grow up than us. I just hope he can find what he was looking for." Harry nodded and they resumed their cuddling in the chair as the party began to wind down.

The following week was much like the previous one as Harry and Hermione avoided trouble as they began their final preparations for the DA and began sending out invitations to the students they had invited to join the group. Harry had spent several spare hours practicing the spells he planned on teaching the group and the fighting tactics that he planned on teaching. Hermione would often sit in as Harry practiced and would marvel as Harry conjured impressive shields that no one else could conjure with the exception of Dumbledore but he would teach the easiest shield conjuration to the DA members.

Wednesday after Transfiguration Professor McGonagall finally got her wish to see Harry and Hermione's animagus forms. McGonagall watched as the two coyotes appeared where her two favorite students had stood and she smiled and wanly said, "I'd say this was surprising but then I would be giving both of you credit for something I actually expected. Even last year it was apparent to me that you both have a very deep connection and I postulate that your connection precipitated such a change."

Harry and Hermione transformed back and Hermione was beaming with a smile before she said, "Actually Professor that is exactly what

Harry said the first time that he had seen my form. Perhaps you two could discuss your theories on the topic and write a book.”

Harry shook his head as he chuckled and said, “Well love, maybe you can write a book about our conversation because I don’t feel like writing one.”

Professor McGonagall smiled and said, “It may surprise you both to know, that I shared a very similar discussion to this with Mr. Potter’s parents back in their seventh year. Your mother wanted your father to write a book on animagus transformations because he was perhaps the most gifted student I have ever had the pleasure of teaching in transfiguration. I see much of that talent in you know Harry.” Harry smiled sadly and excused himself as Hermione stayed behind with McGonagall.

Professor McGonagall softly said, “Hermione, I am afraid Harry may never fully recover from the loss of his parents. I have no doubts that Harry has some fuzzy recollection of how loved he was before they were killed and that alone allowed him to survive his years with his horrid relations. His parents were two of the best people I ever knew, and I wept when I heard they had been murdered. I believe that before this is finished it will become apparent that he needs a strong woman in his life, and I think we should all be thankful that he has you.”

Hermione smiled and shook her head before she said, “Ma’am with all due respect, Harry needs me no more than I need him. Harry is my strength and I am his strength. I doubt either of us would have survived the first week if I hadn’t been there to comfort him following his detention and if he hadn’t been there to keep my emotions in check and be my strength. It’s funny because I’ll be 16 tomorrow and he is 15 but I can honestly say that we are both hopelessly in love with each other and while that is a scary thought it is a brilliant feeling.” Professor McGonagall sniffled a little and grabbed a tissue to dab at her eyes with. Hermione left with a sad smile to find Harry and get ready for their next class.

Harry spent every minute away from Hermione the week leading up to her birthday, organizing her party for it. Harry was able to pull

some strings with Dumbledore in order to have the party held at Black Manor, Wednesday night with her parents, and a couple of her other friends invited along with most of the order.

Hermione awoke on her birthday and was greeted by Harry at the base of the stairs with a hug and a kiss. Hermione smiled and said, "I think I could get used to starting my birthday like this."

Harry smiled and whispered in her ear, "Your big surprise is later but for now I figured we could have a nice quiet breakfast that is unless you have other plans." Hermione shook her head as Harry took her book bag with one hand and her hand with his other hand.

Harry was the epitome of a sweet boyfriend all day as he held doors and helped her to her seat in every class. Granted while Hermione thought it was sweet initially she began to grow a little annoyed by his constant help by the end of classes for the day.

Finally as Harry helped her to her seat in the great hall for dinner, Hermione snapped, "Harry would you stop it, I am perfectly capable of doing things for myself." Harry looked at her and gaped with a very hurt expression on his face. He merely shook his head and walked out of the great hall.

Hermione took a few minutes to regain her composure before she left the hall looking for Harry. After she checked all of their usual spots she retrieved the Marauder's map and found he was walking aimlessly though the castle. Hermione began to feel bad for her outburst and was worried when she saw Harry was heading straight towards Umbridge. Hermione grabbed the cloak and map and ran out of the common room towards Harry. She moved as quickly as she could all the while keeping an eye on the map. She watched as Harry took a sudden turn towards Dumbledore's office as Umbridge was right behind him always a corner behind him so that she never saw him. Hermione took the shortcut to Dumbledore's office and watched as Harry rounded the last corner.

She decided to follow him into the office still under the cloak and when she reached the top of the stairs she heard Harry say, "Love I know your there. How about I show you, your big surprise?"

Hermione pulled off the cloak as her brain processed Harry's statement and she said, "Are you telling me this has all been a set up?"

Harry shook his head and stiffly said, "No I was going to bring you here after dinner but you snapped at me and I needed some time to think."

Hermione shrank a little and contritely said, "I'm sorry Harry, I know you were just trying to be sweet to me for my birthday. But, I like to do things for myself."

Harry nodded and softly replied, "I know love, but I figured for your birthday I would do it for you. I guess it really doesn't matter now." Harry sighed as he ran his hands through his messy hair and continued, "We're here now so why don't we take the floo back to Black Manor."

Hermione frowned a little, now realizing that her outburst had ruined Harry's carefully made plans for the day, and she sadly took the headmaster's fireplace to Black Manor with Harry shortly behind.

Hermione stumbled in to the living room at Black Manor and was immediately greeted by Tonks. "Wotcher Hermione, where's Harry?"

Hermione bit her lip and sadly replied, "I ruined his plans for today because I yelled at him for holding my chair for me and opening doors. I think I kind of hurt his feelings."

Tonks made a brief frown before she smiled and replied, "Ah don't you worry about Harry. I think he'll be just fine for the party."

Hermione nodded then replied, "That's not what I am worried about. It's that I snapped at Harry when he was only trying to do something nice for me that makes me feel bad." Tonks nodded as they watched Harry tumble in through the fireplace but maintaining his balance.

Harry made a soft smile and took Hermione's hand and said, "Come on, let's go see what you got for your birthday."

Hermione took the smile as an offer of peace and took his arm with a smile as they made their way to the parlor room. Hermione shrieked and ran into the room as she saw her parents waiting for her with hugs. She turned around and saw Harry sitting there with a big smile on his face in the entrance of the room, and Hermione knew then, that she would be making it up to him for awhile and that was fine in fact it was almost a good thing.

Hermione received several books for presents as she got a rare book on DADA from Lupin and she got a book on glamours and concealment from Tonks. Hermione got *Fighting Dirty Against Dirt Wizards* from Moody and it was a first edition seeing as how he had written it. Professor McGonagall got her a book on transfiguring you wand into various body parts and Hermione understood that it would be a useful skill for their animagus forms. Hermione's parents got her a wizarding camera with several rolls of film. Finally it was time for her final presents from Dumbledore, Sirius, and Harry.

Dumbledore gave her a small box that looked like a jewelry box. Hermione arched her eyebrow but the old wizard urged her to open the box. Inside the box was a pair of rings with some intricate runic carvings along the band. Dumbledore simply said, "I assumed after Ms. Weasley's attempt, that you would like some form of protection against any means of outside controlling forces. These rings should perform the job admirably." Hermione smiled brightly and gave the old wizard a hug as he chuckled like a grandfather would.

Sirius went next and handed Hermione a small box. Hermione opened the box and pulled out a pair of mirrors. Sirius smiled and said, "These aren't your typical mirrors. One is for you and one is for Harry. Basically, your mirror has a partner mirror here with your parents, while Harry's is spelled to the one I have. This way we can all talk when we need someone to listen to, and I think that will make things a lot easier until we can see each other in person again over Christmas." Hermione smiled and gave Sirius a hug as Harry finally moved from the entrance of the room.

Harry handed Hermione two small boxes. Hermione opened the larger box first and found several more charms for her charm necklace. Harry softly said, "These charms are for our first year

together.” Hermione had gotten charms of a small coyote, and a red crescent for her taking care of his hand.” Hermione smile brightly as she had Harry put the necklace back around her neck as she held her hair up.

Harry then opened the second box and a small plain golden ring. Harry softly said, “I know we are way too young to think about marriage, or even engagement for that matter, but this is a promise ring. It carries so many promises for our future together that I won’t even narrow it down to marriage or children. Just that it carries my love and promises for your happiness in the future. I love you ‘Mione.” Hermione had tears streaming down her face as she wrapped Harry into a tight hug and kissed him firmly on the lips.

Throughout the room no one had a dry eye as Elizabeth wrapped her daughter into a hug as each woman cried on the others shoulder. David had wrapped Harry into a hug as Sirius patted him on the back and simply said, “Couldn’t have said it better myself kiddo.”

Harry eventually returned back to his spot by the door and watched as Hermione was congratulated and hugged for her birthday. Dumbledore looked over at Harry and smiled as he could see the same twinkle in his eyes that had become so synonymous with himself. Harry and the headmaster shared a look that conveyed a million words and yet none, before Harry returned the same smile Dumbledore had flashed him.

The party came to an end as Harry didn’t say another word for the rest of the night. Hermione eventually dragged Harry back to her seat and sat in his lap as she wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him the occasional kiss as she carried on in the conversations around the table.

Harry was happy just sitting listening to Hermione as she laughed and made witty comments about every topic from Quidditch to complex runic sequences. Harry realized that he had always known, that it’s the happiness of the ones we love that matters more than our own happiness as he nuzzled Hermione’s neck which caused her to giggle. Even if for only one night, Harry Potter’s life was perfect.

A/N: Please review. This chapter ended with a lot of fluff but I thought it would be necessary because the fluff for the year is coming to a close and hard times are ahead.

Chapter 22

The week following Hermione's birthday was reasonably quiet aside from a return to the prophet disparaging Harry as it had in the past year. This year he was bolstered by his minority share in the paper and sent an owl to the paper threatening a fire sale of his shares. The Article that was written said:

Boy-who-lived or Boy-who-loves-attention

By: Penelope Clearwater

Ever since the announcement of the tri-wizard tournament there has been an up swelling of unrest towards the ministry despite its track record of keeping the peace since he-who-must-not-be-named and his downfall at the hands of Harry Potter.

The source of the unrest has been the same young man that served as a savior all those many years ago. Upon his unconventional and some may even call underhanded entry into the tournament as an unheard of fourth contestant, Mr. Potter has garnered and sought attention for all things including his sordid love life and his so-called heroics.

By the end of the tournament Potter was once again a proclaimed hero of the wizarding world after helping to apprehend multiple former followers of the earlier mentioned dark wizard. An unconfirmed ministry source has uncovered damning evidence that indicates that Potter actually murdered fellow contestant Cedric Diggory and took his previously apprehended villains with the help from cohort Albus Dumbledore.

Are Mr. Potter's heroics based upon lies or is the boy-who-lived truly the hero he wants the public to think he is. This reporter believes that even if Mr. Potter has told the truth to the public as it deserves, that such private citizens should be kept under close eye by the ministry to ensure there are no attempts at power.

In truth Harry found the article from Percy Weasley's girlfriend to be rather funny even though its intent was anything but. Soon following

the article Ron received a letter from Percy echoing Penelope's sentiments but expressly requested that Ron distance himself further from Harry because it would end up rolling the Weasley family name through the mud.

By the time the final Tuesday of the month had arrived Harry and Hermione had forwarded all of the invitations to join the DA. Everyone had agreed enthusiastically to join the group and had accepted the time and date of the meeting after they signed loyalty parchment.

Everyone arrived by 8pm as Blaise and Daphne came in last fresh from their rounds as Dumbledore took over for them. The assorted group assembled by house as Harry requested of them and waited for them to calm down before he said, "Hello everyone based upon your appearances I am happy to welcome you to the DA or defense association. Professor Dumbledore requested I start a small group for students who are gifted in the area of defense to provide to sorely lacking practical experience that our defense teachers have provided in the past aside from Professor Lupin and to a lesser extent last year with the fake Professor Moody. I would like to answer any questions you may have about me before we start so we can get started tonight because we will only be meeting twice a month with the exception being this month."

Daphne Greengrass asked, "What happened after the portkey in the third task." Everyone that knew the truth of the night gasped before Harry motioned them to be quiet.

Harry sighed and said, "Cedric and I were transported to a graveyard outside of Voldemort or Riddle's Manor. Once we arrived I asked Cedric to take the portkey back to Hogwarts, and to inform Professor Dumbledore where I was. As Cedric took the portkey back he was hit with *reducto* in the chest and then vanished." Harry looked very pale as he finished the last sentence and took some deep labored breaths before he continued, "Peter Pettigrew was the one he hit Cedric with the curse as he carried a bundle that looked like a baby. I hexed Pettigrew a few times before he hit me with a stunner. When I came to I was tied to the tombstone of Tom Marvolo Riddle Sr. or better known as the father of Lord Voldemort. They performed a ritual where they cut me arm up to draw some blood. As a result Voldemort

regained his body. I passed out again from pain from my scar and when I came to, several deatheaters had joined him in the graveyard. He freed me and placed me under the cruciatus curse.” Several of the Ravenclaws and the Slytherins flinched when he said this as he continued, “I duelled with him and got away. I stunned and bound Pettigrew just as Professor Dumbledore arrived for me. We took a portkey back to Hogwarts with Pettigrew. Once we returned Dumbledore took Pettigrew into custody and asked me to stay on the pitch and wait for him to return. As I waited with Hermione, the fake Moody came and shot a stunner at the both of us after I refused to go with him. He stunned Hermione because she wasn’t expecting it from a professor and I reflected his spell back at him and then bound him. He reverted back to Barty Crouch Jr. as we waited and the Professor Dumbledore returned for us.”

Harry was extremely pale as he relived the night in his mind and excused himself for a moment to regain his composure. Harry returned as one more hand was raised by Mathias Stern as he quietly, and respectfully, asked, “Did you really kill a basilisk second year?”

Harry merely nodded and said, “Are there any more questions?” When no one raised their hand he grinned and said, “Good, let’s get down to business then. I would like each of you to pair off with anyone else here and I or Hermione will make the rounds and work on any defects in your technique or form. Tonight we are going to stick to rudimentary protego shields and stunners or disarming jinxes. I want our primary focus to be on accuracy tonight so start with standard dueling form and we’ll be around to watch.”

Harry and Hermione went around the room and took silent notes as they watched everyone duel. They checked reaction times and strengths of the spells of each person so they would be able to customize the training for the members in specific areas. The meeting went well as Harry and Hermione were pleased with all of the members.

They reached the end of the meeting and Hermione spoke up, “I have created a final sign up sheet which operates as a modified Fidelus and memory charm that I invented.” Harry looked at her with pride as gave her a kiss which caused her to blush before she continues, “If

you attempt to reveal the existence of the group willingly, you will lose all memory of the group and no amount of Verisateum or legilimency will be able to regain those memories. Once you sign the sheet you will be issued a galleon which is modified to reveal the time and date of our future meetings. All meetings will be at night so that they won't conflict with classes. When a meeting is called the galleon will give off some heat and you can see the time and date of the meeting."

Harry picked up from there, "Thanks everyone for a productive meeting. Next meeting we will work on more advanced topics including the patronus charm. The spells learned in here and techniques used will be growing progressively more difficult and we will work on squad based battles. Have a good night and stay out of Umbridge's way." Everyone chuckled at the last statement as the students piled out of the room and went back to their common rooms.

Hermione smiled at Harry and said, "Well Mr. Potter, if I didn't know better I'd think I was looking at a future DADA professor."

Harry smiled and replied, "You really think so?"

Hermione nodded and replied, "You are a very patient teacher Harry and yet still command respect. Just imagine two Professor Potter's at Hogwarts." Harry smiled and twined his fingers with Hermione's before they left the room and made the short trip back to the Gryffindor common room.

The weekend following the first meeting of the DA was also incidentally the first Hogsmeade weekend of the year.

Harry awoke at his standard 6 am and made the short trip to the room to continue his daily routine he had established during the summer. Harry was slowly becoming the most physically fit student at the school with his daily training and Hermione made her appreciation known often. Harry returned to the common room to still find it completely empty. He ran upstairs and grabbed his change of clothes before he went to the prefect's bathroom and took a bath. Harry threw on a nice pair of slacks and a plain black button down shirt. He attached his wrist and thigh wand holsters and styled his hair before he pinned his badge on his shirt and went back to the common room.

When Harry got back Hermione was sitting in her favorite chair reading a book. She glanced up as Harry entered and a big smile spread across her face. Harry walked over to her and gave her a deep kiss and Harry basically sucked her soul out much like a dementor would. When they broke apart Hermione was quite flushed and appeared to be a little light headed after being administered the kiss. Harry smiled and said, "Oh no, I think I might have kissed her silly."

Hermione snapped out of her haze and wickedly said, "Yes Mr. Potter you did. I intend on getting my revenge later too, so don't think you're getting away with kissing me like that and not sitting with me afterwards."

Harry merely smiled as he delicately picked Hermione up and sat her on his lap and he began to read her book as she did the same. They read several pages although Hermione had to be patient and wait until Harry would finish a page. They were eventually broken from their little world as Lavender came up to them and squealed, "Oh you guys are just so cute when you do things like this. Do you guys want to meet at the three broomsticks at the end of the trip to relax with some friends?"

Hermione looked at Harry who smiled and she replied, "That's sounds lovely Lavender. Are you going with anyone in particular?"

Lavender smiled and replied, "Yes I'm going with Ronny, and he promised we'd spend some time at Madame Puddifoot's." Hermione nodded as Lavender went to go find Ron.

Harry looked at Hermione before he whispered in her ear, "Ronny?"

Hermione giggled and replied, "Come on Harry, she is good for him in a lot of ways. I bet his divination marks are going up, and he isn't as moody anymore."

Harry smiled and cheekily said, "What can us men say, our lives become much simpler with a beautiful woman to boss us around."

Hermione playfully scowled and said, "Oh, I think I've just rethought my revenge plans for later. I don't think they'll be necessary now."

Harry looked like a puppy that had been hit with a rolled newspaper before he gave Hermione his puppy dog eyes and she relented, "Alright I take it back, so please stop giving me the puppy dog eyes love, or I won't want to leave this chair today."

Harry thoughtfully scratched his chin and pondered aloud, "Would that be such a bad thing?"

Hermione smiled and gave Harry a quick peck on the lips before she said, "Yes, because I need to get some new quills and I thought we could do some book shopping. If you're good, we can look at the new Quidditch shop too." Harry smiled brightly as he helped Hermione get back to her feet.

As they rode in the carriages into Hogsmeade Harry was remembering back to his third year when he wasn't allowed to go to Hogsmeade. Harry looked at Hermione and asked, "When you went with Ron to Hogsmeade third year, it was a date wasn't it?"

Hermione arched an eyebrow and replied, "Well, I think that's what Ron thought. In fact, he tried to snog me once when we went to the shrieking shack to visit. I told the poor boy that I could never like him like that, because all we ever did was argue, and ever since then I think he thought the problem was that I didn't know a good thing when I saw it. Of course he was wrong per usual, I found you and I can most certainly say I know a good thing when I see it, like right now." Hermione kissed Harry deeply and if he still wore his glasses they would have fogged up before they finally broke apart.

Harry had the same dazed expression Hermione had sported earlier before Hermione broke him out of his stupor as she said, "Just so you know love, that's only the beginning of my revenge."

Harry made a crooked grin and said, "I think I am going to enjoy revenge with you love." Hermione giggled as the carriage they shared with Neville and Luna, who had become rather comfortable themselves, pulled into Hogsmeade and stopped just outside of the small wizarding village.

Harry got out of the carriage and helped Hermione down as Neville did the same for Luna out the other door. Hermione led Harry to

Scrivenshaft's first as she looked at several different quills before she settled on a set of black and red pheasant quills. Harry picked up some golden eagle feather quills for his own purposes before they moved on to the book store.

As Harry browsed the store he watched as Hermione was calculating how much she could spend and still have money for the three broomsticks. Harry walked up behind her and softly said, "I want you to pick out one book that I can get for you. I know you don't want me always buying you stuff but I figure we could always read it together like we did this morning. That is if you'd want to read with me again." Harry finished in a very fidgety manner realizing that he might be treading into forbidden Hermione reading territory.

Hermione smiled at Harry's discomfort before she said, "Harry, I actually enjoyed reading with you this morning a lot. If you want to buy me a book we can read together, then once you find what you want for yourself, we'll look together ok?" Harry smiled as he looked visibly relieved before he returned to the books on enchantments he had been looking at. Harry decided to get two books on the enchantment of inanimate objects.

Harry returned to find Hermione with two books of her own on potion theory and also a new book on mind magics. Hermione glanced at Harry's books and immediately became interested as she asked, "Oh enchantment of inanimate objects. Those books sound really interesting Harry. Can I borrow them when you are done with them?"

Harry smiled and said, "Yeah, but I think I'll take my time with them, and I probably won't start reading them until closer to the end of the month. Shall we look for our cuddle book then?"

Hermione smiled as she took Harry's offered hand and they browsed all over the store until they found a book on battle magic that they thought would be very useful for future DA meetings. Secretly Hermione was enthused that Harry had taken so quickly to teaching because he obviously loved it and was talented as a teacher as she recalled her patronus lessons from the previous year.

After they paid for their respective books Harry shrunk the books down with his second wand that had gotten little use since he had

first gotten it. They finally moved on to the Quidditch shop as Harry was going to get some new seeker gloves and a broom polishing kit for the coming year. Hermione played the dutiful girlfriend as she appeared to be interested in everything Harry talked to her about, including the differences between the various brands of Quidditch gloves and broom polishing kits. After Harry paid for his supplies and shrunk them once again, he turned to Hermione and said, "Hermione love, I never want you to pretend you like something for my sake. I know Quidditch bores you to death, and probably the only reason you go to games is because of me. I also know you worry yourself sick when I play, so you don't have to go to my games this year if you think you can do something better with your time."

Hermione sighed and absently played with a piece of her hair before she said, "Harry, I really don't know what to say to that."

Harry shrugged and said, "I just want you to know that you should never feel forced to do something simply on my account."

Hermione looked like she was suffering an intense personal struggle before she looked Harry in the eye and resolutely said, "Harry I love you. If Quidditch is something you love, then I should be willing to give it a shot for you. I'm not doing something I feel forced to do when I watch you play Quidditch, and it's not like you are Ron and it's all you talk about. So, from now on, I won't bother to hide my opinion on something, but that doesn't mean what you do doesn't interest me ok?"

Harry smiled and gave Hermione a peck on the cheek and a soft hug before he took her hand and they walked into the three broomsticks with just over an hour until they needed to return to the carriages.

As they entered the three broomsticks their good day was about to get worse. Harry and Hermione opened the door to find the entire place empty aside from Malfoy and several members of the inquisitorial squad. He had a particularly nasty smirk on his face before he said, "Hey Scarhead, I see you brought you mudblood with you. I'm sure we can think of some stuff to do to her."

Harry calmly looked at the Slytherin and clearly annoyed he said, "What is it exactly that you want Malfoy?"

Draco stood up and said, "I want you to pay for all of the times you've embarrassed me in the past and I plan on collecting with blood."

Harry laughed and grabbed Hermione and pushed her out the door before casting a *colloportus* on the door. Harry calmly waited for the barrage of spells to come and then he calmly conjured his shield and did several disarming hexes before the squad knew what hit them. Harry's eyes were twinkling at the inept group of wizards in front of him as he said, "I really don't care who your parents are, and I really don't care what you think you are entitled to. If any of you threatens Hermione again, I will make you hurt in ways you could only dream of."

Just as Harry turned to leave, Malfoy summoned his wand and let off a cutting hex that slashed Harry deeply on his back. Without even flinching, Harry merely turned around as his eyes were glowing green, and he merely waved his hand, sending Malfoy flying into an unconscious heap at the base of the wall behind him. If Harry had stayed a moment longer, he would have seen that half of the inquisitorial squad members there had wet themselves at Harry's display of power.

As Harry got outside of the three broomsticks he stumbled as the pain from Malfoy's cowardly hex hit him *hard*. Hermione who had been outside the bar seething about Harry's actions immediately gave up her anger for concern as she saw Harry stagger out of the bar with blood freely running down a gash on his back.

Hermione was surprisingly calm as she did the only thing she could think of as she called out, "Dobby!"

The little house elf arrived with a soft pop and saw Harry's state. The little elf grabbed on to Harry and without a word he brought Harry and Hermione to the hospital wing.

The first thing they saw was Madam Pomfrey drop the tea cup she had been holding and then she simply said, "Only you, Mr. Potter."

A/N: Please Review. I think I've developed this habit of writing cliffhangers or something. Anyways, the fall out from the attack

at the three broomsticks will be felt throughout the school, and I mean throughout it. Keep reading and thanks for the reviews.

Chapter 23

Harry awoke the next morning to find Hermione conspicuously absent from the spot she usually inhabited when he was in the hospital wing. Harry frowned realizing he was completely alone until he heard Madam Pomfrey bustle into the room and immediately start fussing over Harry.

“Mr. Potter, perhaps you could tell me exactly how you found yourself here yesterday.” Madam Pomfrey huffed making Harry even more confused.

Harry looked at the old matron and quietly answered, “Hermione and I, we ran into the entire inquisitorial squad at the three broomsticks. I think they had planned to ambush us. I got Hermione out and then disarmed all of them. As I went to leave Malfoy summoned his wand and cursed me in the back. I knocked him out and then I ran into Hermione. That’s really all I remember ma’am.”

The nurse’s face softened and she replied, “Well that is a considerably different story, especially from what Madam Umbridge and Mr. Malfoy have been spreading around. Although, I must admit, your story is more believable.”

Harry’s perplexed look on his face forced her to continue, “Mr. Malfoy claimed that you accosted the entire group of students in an unprovoked nature, although he has refused to take Verisateum, or a pensieve recount of the event. Madam Umbridge has of course petitioned for your expulsion, the headmaster refuses to do so solely based upon Mr. Malfoy’s story and its inconsistencies. Of course, the minister is in the castle, demanding the headmaster take the advice of *his* high inquisitor. I fear that things may get very messy at Hogwarts, probably before the day is through.”

Harry smiled and replied, “Well, I will be more than happy to give my recollection of the story, that is, if you’d inform someone.” Madam Pomfrey went to stand up before Harry grasped her arm and quietly asked, “Ma’am, do you know why Hermione isn’t here? I mean, she’s not mad at me is she?”

Pomfrey smiled and replied, "No dear child, the minister has mandated that no one visit you until he can question you with Verisateum. Poor Hermione, the dear child was in tears when they dragged her from you last night." Harry nodded weakly as he continued to sit in his bed awaiting his chance to clear his name.

Finally, Harry heard a loud commotion just outside the entrance as he heard people shout and scream before the doors flew open and Minister Fudge along with Percy Weasley and a few aurors stormed up to Harry's bed.

Fudge bellowed as he said, "Mr. Potter, despite your relative fame, I will not allow you to accost fellow students simply because you have a disagreement with them."

Harry smiled which riled up the minister more before he said, "Minister, I believe you should question me under Verisateum or take a pensieve testimony before you so quickly accept the word of the junior deatheaters in the school instead of mine."

Fudge opened and closed his mouth a couple of times before he forced a tight smile and replied, "Of course, Mr. Potter would you mind if we do your Verisateum questioning now?"

Harry smiled and said, "Not at all minister, all I request is that I might have Professor Dumbledore's presence, so that I might have a witness with my best interests at heart."

Fudge bristled for a moment before he reluctantly nodded, and within five minutes the headmaster had arrived with his eyes in full twinkle which caused Harry to chuckle despite himself.

Percy manufacture a small vial of the clear liquid and Harry willingly gulped it down before his eyes became unfocused.

Fudge asked, "Mr. Potter did you or did you not cause physical harm to Draco Malfoy?"

Harry replied in monotone, "Yes I did." Fudge smiled triumphantly before one look from Dumbledore forced him to continue the questioning.

Fudge asked, "Were you the first to fire at Mr. Malfoy and the rest of the members of the inquisitorial squad?"

Harry replied, "No, all of the members of the inquisitorial squad fired first and I brought up a shield to block the spells."

Fudge frowned while it was time for Dumbledore to gloat, before Fudge continued, "Did you fire any spells in retaliation after the initial wave of spells from the inquisitorial squad?"

Harry simply replied, "Yes I disarmed all of them." Fudge bristled at the notion of a half blood getting the drop on a very large group of purebloods, but he kept his thoughts to himself on the matter wisely.

Fudge continued, "After you disarmed the group did you fire any spells unprovoked?"

Harry replied, "No I did not."

Fudge continued cursing his poorly worded question and asked, "Did you fire any spells that were provoked by the actions of another?"

Harry replied, "I was hit in the back with a cutting hex by Draco Malfoy, as I turned my back to him and attempted to leave the bar without anyone being hurt. After he hexed me in the back, I turned around and hexed him into a wall rendering him unconscious. I left the bar immediately afterwards upon where I realized I was bleeding quite badly and passed out."

Fudge checked his watch and realized the dose would be running out soon and he merely said, "Very well Mr. Potter, the ministry withdraws its request for your expulsion. Do you request any action be taken against Mr. Malfoy for the incident?"

Harry smiled as he eyes were once again focused before he said, "I would like his rights to play Quidditch in any official capacity to be revoked."

Fudge arched his eyebrow and said, "That's all you request after he hexed you in the back?"

Harry smirked and replied, "Well I figure I should only require something that his daddy can't buy his way out of, like last year in potions class when he tried to murder me. I think we know how Lucius Malfoy has earned, or should I say bought his influence, don't we, minister?"

Fudge stood and whisked out of the hospital wing without another word. Dumbledore smiled at his young friend and said, "Harry, should I summon Ms. Granger to inform that you request her presence?" Harry smiled and nodded and Dumbledore whisked out of the hospital wing himself.

Not five minutes later, Hermione burst in through the doors of the hospital wing and in two steps she was back at his side and wrapping him into a tight hug. She whispered in his ear, "I was so worried about you Harry. But, that doesn't mean you aren't in the doghouse for pushing me out of there." Hermione looked at Harry pleadingly, "I could have helped you love."

Harry sighed and said, "I know you can defend yourself Hermione." He ran his hand through his hair distractedly and continues, "Hermione, have I ever told you the time that I was the most scared in my entire life?"

Hermione shook her head and Harry continued, "I was most scared in second year when Professor McGonagall grabbed Ron and I before the Quidditch match, and she told us that there had been an accident." Harry took a deep shuddering breath before continuing, "When I saw you on that bed so still and pale, I almost died. I visited you every day for an hour, and just sat next to you and held your hand, which I admit, was more for me than anything else. That's when I realized that what I felt for you was different than what I felt for Ron."

Hermione gasped and brought her hand to her mouth but Harry took her hand in his own and continued, "Now that doesn't mean I was in love with you, but it was different from what I had from Ron, and knew that it was different in a good way too. I don't know, I just couldn't live to see you like that again, especially when I could do something to

prevent it. I'm sorry that I feel that way, but I love you too much to do anything different unless I have no other choice."

Hermione softly said, "I never told you this Harry, but I knew when people were visiting me then, and I looked forward to the time everyday when you would visit just sitting with me, and talking about your day. It made me feel like I truly fit in with someone for the first time in my life. I realized how lonely your life had been when you talked about your childhood in passing, and I wished so much to talk to you and tell you it was the same for me, but I couldn't say anything. That's why I hugged you after I was unpetrified, in the great hall you know. I wanted you to know I went through the same stuff growing up so much, but after second year I kind of ran from those feelings."

Harry smiled and said, "I think even if we had found something then we wouldn't have known what to do, so it was for the better that we didn't get together until last year. Now, why don't you tell me why I shouldn't protect you, because I know we got a little sidetracked there?"

Hermione frowned slightly and said, "Well Harry, everything you described about seeing me pale and motionless applies to one of the many times you've spent in the hospital wing and I've had to watch you. I never told you this but third year when you fell from your broom I thought you were going to die. Every other time before then when you were hurt it seemed like a fairytale or some nonsense because the hero never dies. But, as I watched you falling to the ground my heart stopped. For months after that I had nightmares where Dumbledore wasn't able to cast that spell on you to slow you down and I would always see your broken body with your green eyes dimmed looking blankly into space." Hermione sniffled as a few tears rolled down her cheeks before Harry gently rubbed them away with his left hand as his right hand rubbed her back.

Hermione was able to compose herself enough to continue, "So Harry I do know how you felt in second year, I know you don't think your life is as worth as mine but you're wrong. To me Harry, your life is more valuable than mine, so why can't I feel the same as you do for me and allow me to protect you too." Harry reluctantly nodded and Hermione gave Harry a kiss on the cheek.

After a long silence where Harry and Hermione just held hands, Hermione said, "Well you got off of the expulsion cries but Umbridge had demanded that you have detention with her for the entire month. Professor McGonagall has threatened the entire inquisitorial squad with detention for the year unless Umbridge steps down her demands, and at the moment I believe they are having a conference with Professor Dumbledore."

Harry nodded and said, "Something tells me I won't be serving detention with the toad again this year."

Harry was released from the hospital wing Sunday night as a result of his blood loss. Harry found a hero's welcome awaiting him when he returned to Gryffindor tower, but he surprised Ron when he simply said, "Nah mate, I don't feel much like celebrating another near death experience. I think I'll just go to bed for the night, thanks anyways."

All of the girls in the room watched Harry with sadness while the guys in the room couldn't understand why Harry wouldn't want to celebrate putting the slimy Slytherins in their place. Only two people knew why Harry was done celebrating his near death experiences, and they weren't talking.

The week following the incident was disturbingly quiet as though the Slytherin's in the Inquisitorial squad were plotting something very big and swift retribution for Harry's actions was imminent. Harry and Hermione stayed out of trouble as Harry and Ron prepared for the first Quidditch match of the year against Ravenclaw.

During the week Harry began to get a flood of love letters from many lovesick witches declaring their undying love for Harry because of his bravery in the face of danger once again. Of course the ministry had spun the incident as the three broomsticks as Harry taking down a group of thugs that were now in ministry custody. The story was only partially correct as the group of thugs were currently safely found in the confines of Hogwarts attending classes.

Harry actually received a strange letter from Cho Chang, two days before the match, as it read:

Dearest Harry,

I have found it very difficult to write this letter and I have wanted to for so very long. I want to apologize for my behavior last year before the tri-wizard tournament. I foolishly played hard to get with you and went with Cedric to the ball even though the truth is I liked you more. I really liked Cedric and when he died I went into a state of depression for awhile clouding my feelings for you until the first meeting of your group.

I am aware that you are going out with that mousy bookworm and have been for nearly a year, but I beg you to give me a chance to make you as happy as you deserve. I don't expect you to answer immediately, but I do expect to have an answer by Christmas. Please don't leave me alone in this world, I've just gotten over Cedric and I couldn't bear to lose you before I've even had you.

Love,

Cho

As soon as Harry read the letter he handed it to a curious Hermione. By the time she had finished reading the letter anger was etched across her face as she angrily shrieked, "*Mousy bookworm*, and here she is playing the pity card as a grieving widow. Oh this makes me so mad."

Hermione then looked at Harry, who was deep in thought, with concern and asked, "You aren't considering this are you love?"

Harry was broken from his meanderings and softly replied, "No love, I was just questioning the timing of the letter. For one, it is only two days before our Quidditch match against Ravenclaw so she might be trying to distract me from that. But of course she wouldn't have written she would wait for an answer until Christmas if that was the case. I don't know but something doesn't quite measure up here. I mean this is Cho's handwriting, at least as far as I can remember from her signature on the loyalty oath sheet, but this isn't like something she would write."

Hermione was visibly calming after her outburst, and began sifting through the puzzle of the letter like Harry had, "Do you think she could be under the *imperio*?"

"I don't know she could be, I mean I haven't had much of a chance to look into her eyes recently and she might only have been under the curse to write the letter. It'll be too difficult to do anything until they make a move. One thing that bothers me is that she mentioned our group. If she was under the curse she wouldn't be able to show up to the next meeting would she?" Harry began to muse aloud.

Hermione chewed on Harry's ramblings for a moment before she said, "I think that's the best we have to go on at the moment love, just be careful in your match and I'll keep an eye out for you during the match." Harry nodded silently vowing to reanalyze the topic when he had time to think some time later.

The morning of the first match arrived as the Gryffindor Quidditch team was awaiting the match in the locker room. Katie Bell was pacing anxiously as the entire team was standing around with varying expressions. Harry, Angelina Johnson, and the twins appeared to be rather relaxed about the entire thing while McLaggen appeared to be nearly as terrified as Ron was.

Katie nervously looked around at the group and said, "Ok guys, this is an important match here today. Harry, you need to control the skies and make sure you keep the beaters preoccupied along with Chang. Chasers, we all need to do as we practiced and Harry won't need to catch the snitch for us to win. Fred, George, and Ron you guys know what you need to do and we'll win."

Lions on Three, 1, 2, 3 Lions

After they made their war cry the Gryffindor Quidditch team slowly made their way out on to the pitch. Harry took the opportunity to calm his redheaded friend as he said, "Oy Ron you need to relax a little or you won't be able to play your best game."

Ron sighed nervously and looked at Harry before he replied, "Yeah mate that's easy for you to say. It's not like this is your first game."

Harry smiled and said, "Oh I was plenty nervous for my first game, but I still played my game. I channeled my nerves into focusing on the task at hand, and played my game. Just think about what you want to do on the field, instead of the fact that you're nervous and everything

will turn out fine. I mean Davies isn't that good of a chaser so you'll be fine." Ron smiled as they each kicked off on their brooms to hover above the field.

Harry flew up into the air and went over to the Gryffindor stands to find Hermione. She stood up on her toes and gave Harry a kiss on the cheek for good luck before he winked at her and flew back to the center of the pitch awaiting the start of the match.

Out of the corner of his eye Harry caught Cho scowling at Hermione, as she also alternated in her attempts to make google eyes at Harry before the match. Madam Hooch released the Quaffle, Snitch, and Bludgers and the match was under way.

Immediately Harry began to soar around the pitch distracting Cho enough to force her to follow him, or at least that's why he thought she was following him. Harry dodged a few bludgers as he faked dives to distract the beaters and Cho. He took a slow spot in the play to glance at the score as Gryffindor led 70-20.

As Harry heard the faint sound of another Gryffindor goal in the background he finally caught the faint golden glimmer of the object of his attention. Harry immediately began to swoop after the snitch as he heard the chant begin chanting Ron's name after what must have been another nice save. Harry broke into a dead dive as he heard the crowd gasp and he closed in on the snitch. Harry could see that Cho was either well behind him or taking the opportunity to check him out. As Harry began to chuckle at his own meanderings he got within grabbing distance of the snitch after he leveled out from his dive.

The snitch attempted to dart back up but Harry was faster as he grasped the small golden ball with wings and the whistle was blown to the delight of the Gryffindor fans. Harry heard Lee scream out the final score of 250-80 which by any standard was a very solid victory to start the year.

Harry touched down on his broom as the entire team erupted into chants for Harry and Ron. Hermione had reached the pitch in a full sprint for Harry but she was intercepted by McLaggen who was eyeing her up rather predatorily. Hermione arched her eyebrow as

she spotted Harry coming to her rescue, as she said, "Can I help you?"

McLaggen made what he must have thought a charming smile before he said, "I know you're with Potter, but if you want to know what a real man can do for you, why don't you join me in Hogsmeade next weekend."

Hermione snorted and said, "Like you're a real man? Please. Now if you don't mind, I have a snog to give to my boyfriend."

As Hermione made to walk past McLaggen towards Harry, he reached out for her arm only to have his wrist grabbed in a vice like grip by Harry, who said through gritted teeth, "McLaggen, I truly don't care if you are in Gryffindor by some sad mistake of fate or if you fooled the sorting hat, you will not ever attempt to touch Hermione again. I swear you will find the punishment most severe." McLaggen took a step back after Harry released his arm to see Harry's eyes sparking with green fire as he ran off to find another girl to chat up. Harry turned towards Hermione and found himself tackled to the ground as Hermione attempted to suck his brain out through his mouth.

After Hermione broke the kiss they noticed several people looking at them in envy before Hermione stood up and helped Harry to his feet as well. It didn't miss their attention that Cho was giving the absolute deadliest look that Harry had seen aside from Voldemort in the graveyard. Harry smiled at the attention and whispered into Hermione's ear, "Thank you for the kiss love, but I think we need to get back to Gryffindor tower before the rest of this randy lot attempt to have their way with us."

Hermione giggled and nodded as Harry jumped back on his broom and scooped Hermione in front of him as they sped back to the castle to avoid the masses.

The following week brought down the wrath of Hermione upon all Gryffindor fifth years aside from Harry for their supposed lack of a work ethic to begin studying for the OWL's. Hermione had successfully badgered Neville into submission as he joined Harry and Hermione in their OWL reviews. Harry and Hermione had gotten

completely caught up with all of their revisions up until fifth year and they only had the remainder of the term until the roughly Valentine's day, and then the remainder of the year would be spent doing comprehensive OWL reviews in all of their classes.

DADA with Umbridge continued to be a disgrace as she constantly deducted points from every other house aside from Slytherin and always made a point to provoke Harry by calling Hermione a mudblood and then making completely empty apologies for the slip up. Harry took the time to probe the thoughts of the toad and wasn't particularly surprised to find her mind rather empty aside from her pureblood supremacy beliefs.

After the second Hogsmeade weekend of the year went far smoother than the first one Harry and Hermione decided to organize the second DA meeting for the following Thursday before Astronomy was to be held.

While Harry and Hermione tentatively made their way through October most of the school including the staff was waiting for the other shoe to drop and when it would drop, it was going to drop hard.

A/N: Please Review. Next chapter will be an opportunity to get to know the various members of the DA. Thanks and keep reading and reviewing.

Chapter 24

The second DA meeting of the year was planned to precede Astronomy on Thursday night. Harry planned on working out the banishing charm and also the patronus charm. As a result Harry knew that he would be doing more teaching and less supervising than the first meeting. Hermione was most interested in whether Cho Chang would be making an appearance or if she had indeed attempted to betray the group.

Much to Hermione's surprise, Cho did in fact arrive for the meeting, and she made a sweet smile at Harry as he welcomed everyone to the meeting. Blaise and Daphne looked a little worse for the wear when they arrived and Harry concernedly asked, "Blaise, Daphne, you guys look like you haven't been sleeping well. Are you both feeling ok?"

Blaise made a bland smile and replied, "It's kind of hard to sleep a lot when your house is filled with people that want to kill you."

Harry asked, "Would you like me to talk to Dumbledore again, about getting you moved to another house?"

Daphne shook her head and said, "Thank you Harry but we can't. At least not until our families are safe. How is Dumbledore coming on that?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders and said, "I've mentioned it to him the last few times I've talked to him, and he just tells me he is working on it. I'm sorry I can't really tell you any more because I don't know any more." Daphne and Blaise both nodded sadly as they entered the room.

Once everyone had gathered in the room Harry stood up at the lectern the room had provided and said, "Tonight we are going to be working on more difficult spells that very well may save your life in the near future. First, can anyone tell me what a patronus may be used for?"

Ron raised his hand and said, "It can be used to chase of dementors, or to shield someone from the effects of dementors, because a patronus is a concentration of happy thoughts."

Harry smiled and nodded before he said, "Yes, that's correct Ron. Does anyone else know of other uses for a patronus?"

Luna replied, "They could be used as a signal to another person of some danger or of an attack."

Harry looked impressed and replied, "Yes, that is a very creative use of a corporeal patronus. However, few witches and wizards have sufficient training and mental skill to create a corporeal patronus. Is there anyone else with an answer?"

Padma raised her hand and said, "They can be used to repel lethifolds also."

"Yes, those are the primary uses of a patronus for the standard witch or wizard. Luna's suggestion in particular may have some valid application for any future battles you may find yourself in because each individual's patronus is unique to them so it can not be faked and are an ideal means of communication. While the dementors currently are siding with the ministry, I believe they will join Voldemort's ranks very soon." Harry continued as everyone was at rapt attention as he openly discussed the war and its potential players.

Harry spoke passionately as he said, "If we have enough people to pick up the spell, then we will train squads to have at least one patronus caster that will act as a signal, to start counter offensives or retreats in our training. By the end of the DA, I want each and everyone one of you, to be competent enough to take on an equal sized squad of death eaters, and you will defeat them without suffering any casualties." With those simple and passionately spoken words, everyone in the group knew that Harry was the one they would be following in the war against Voldemort, and they felt that if anyone would see it through to the end it would be Harry.

Harry smiled as he had gained almost everyone's attention and said, "Ok, now that I have your attention."

Harry glanced at Ron who immediately stopped talking to Lavender and look sheepish before Harry smirked and continued, "I am going to show you how to focus your mind on a happy thought in the presence of a dementor without succumbing to its effects."

After Harry finished saying this, a chest much like the one Professor Lupin had used in third year appeared and Harry knew that a boggart charmed to appear as a dementor was inside of it.

Harry looked around and walked around the lectern and up to the chest in the center of the room. Harry smiled and said, "Ok, inside this chest is a boggart that is charmed to be a dementor. I will demonstrate the charm and then I want you to each take a turn. I will step in before the boggart does any damage so give it your best effort. I was almost kissed by one of these my third year so I can tell you this charm is something you want to master."

Harry opened the chest as the rest of the DA stood well behind him. Harry said, "*Expecto Patronum*" and the great silver stag bounded out of his wand but it was much larger and brighter than even the one he had cast in third year against the dementors by the lake. The boggart was gored one time and flew back into the trunk, which magically latched upon its arrival.

Harry looked at Hermione who had an awed expression on her face matched by each member of the DA. Mathias Stern spoke for everyone when he said, "Bloody hell Harry. Professor Dumbledore's patronus wasn't even that powerful, when he used it at your quidditch match third year."

Harry had a knowing smile on his face before he shrugged, and said, "I guess, I guess I just had a really happy memory to use."

Hermione had to cover her laugh with a cough before Harry had everyone line up for his or her turn against the boggart dementor. Hermione went first and her doe flew from the tip of her wand and rammed the boggart back into the chest with relative ease. Hermione was very pleased with herself because it was the first time she had used her patronus against a dementor, and everyone else in the group was impressed with her casting because they weren't aware that Harry had taught her the charm last year. Ron looked at the pair

with envy because his first attempt resulted in only the fairest amount of silver vapor to come out of his wand.

The Ravenclaws seemed to pick up the concept faster than the other students did, with Cho even successfully casting a partially formed patronus by the end of class.

The Hufflepuffs were able to conjure a shield when they weren't in the presence of the dementor, but as soon as the dementor was released they lacked the discipline to calm their minds enough to cast the spell. Harry even mused to himself quietly, "I think they just want all of my chocolate." Which prompted a chuckle from Hermione that was once again disguised as a cough.

Daphne and Blaise were both creating solid shields and they appeared more pleased with their success than everyone else did, for reasons only Harry could guess.

With the exception of Harry and Hermione the best attempts from Gryffindor house were from Neville and the twins. Neville made a very impressive shield and each of the twins made average shields, which would buy them 30 seconds from the effects of the dementors. Ron and the other Gryffindor fifth years only had limited success and were able to get some silvery wisps to come from their wands. Alicia had the misfortune of being the only student who passed out from the effects of the boggart dementor. Harry sympathized with her plight and even informed the group of his first experience with a dementor, which caused the laughs of the less sensitive in the group to dry up.

After they finished working on the patronus Harry said, "Ok good work everyone. Now we are going to work on our first potentially lethal curse for the group. The banishing charm, more commonly called Reducto, will be our most valuable tool when we actually find ourselves in an actual combat situation. It is very difficult to shield against because the defending wizard needs to be able to conjure a solid shield which only powerful wizards can do. I am sure you are all aware with the spell, but I am asking you to use it as a weapon. Our greatest resource over the enemy will be our creativity and adaptability to our environments. I am only going to teach you a limited number of advanced spells that will be vital to your survival.

The primary purpose of the group is to teach you how to survive in every conceivable scenario I can throw at you. Make no mistake, a war is coming and our OWL and NEWT scores while important don't equate to life and death. Now lets work on some dummies." As soon as Harry finished speaking, the room provided enough dummies for everyone in the room to practice on.

Harry looked around and said, "Same as first week. We are going to work with accuracy on this spell. Try to hit what you are aiming for both moving and stationary."

As Harry and Hermione practiced on their accuracy everyone else on the group was doing the same. Eventually Harry was happy with his work so he walked around the room watching each person use the spell and gave tips to improve the accuracy of everyone else. Unlike the patronus practice, everyone took a businesslike demeanor on the banishing charm as several repeatedly made the dummies head splinter before it magically repaired itself for the next barrage.

Harry was happy with the group's performance and indicated that they would practice with the boggart again their next meeting. Harry said, "Well, that's all the time we have for tonight. I hope you are all learning useful stuff in here so far." There were a couple of cheers and scream that indicated they were happy, which caused Harry to grin before he continued, "Next meeting this month, we will work the first half of the meeting on patronus practice. The second half of the meeting we will split up into three squads as Hermione and I will be wildcards. Basically a wildcard is someone who works in his or her own interests. We may work with you one minute and work against you the next. We'll be using the same simple spells we practiced first meeting and the winning team will be rewarded with a very useful prize. Keep your eye on the galleons and I'll see you all then."

As the group slowly funneled out of the room an hour before Astronomy was to begin, Harry and Hermione discussed the finer parts of the meeting and both were happy with the progress of the group. As they chatted, Cho came up to Harry with a sweet smile on her face and ignored Hermione as she said, "Harry, did you get my letter?"

Harry arched his eyebrow and replied, "Yes I did Cho, and I have to say it was very surprising."

Cho smiled and said, "I'm glad you liked it. Have you thought any about your answer?"

Harry sighed and replied, "Cho, I'm with Hermione for as long as she'll have me. I'll tell you the same thing I told Ginny Weasley except this time with a twist. Give it up Cho, and this time I add, if you try to do something to Hermione I personally guarantee you won't like the end result."

Harry then stepped closer to Cho, and he whispered to Cho so not even Hermione could hear, as he said, "You really make me sick with how you dishonored Cedric's memory with your letter. I mean for Merlin's sake, I can even tell you need to talk to someone, because that letter indicates you are having emotional problems. If it becomes an issue you'll be kicked out of the DA and have your memory wiped of your knowledge of the group as indicated by the parchment you signed. I don't want to do that because you are a strong member of the group, but your delusions of me in your love life won't ever become reality so please stop this before it's too late."

Harry then stood back and evenly said, "You need to talk to someone about Cedric, Cho. I know I never would have made it through the end of the term if it weren't for Hermione and the headmaster around to talk to. Talk to Professor Flitwick or Professor Snape for all I care but talk to someone because it helps I promise you."

Cho nodded sadly, and Harry gave the girl a hug before she left the room in tears, the reality of her situation finally crashing down upon her, nearly six months after the tragedy of Cedric's death. Harry hugged Hermione and said, "I think she needs to grieve over Cedric. I hate having to be the one to tell her this stuff but I think it will be better if I say it than if someone else who didn't know Cedric does. I don't think she ever truly got over him and she was just trying to replace him with me. I think things will get better from her from now on. I just pray that this war doesn't take anyone else from us." Hermione gripped Harry tightly, and then kissed his lips before they left the room to prepare for Astronomy.

Finally, Friday on their Prefect rounds the battle for Hogwarts officially began. As Harry and Hermione were just beginning their rounds in the dungeon they were cornered by the entirety of the Inquisitorial squad and their toadish leader who sneered and said, "Ah Prince Potter, and his mudblood princess to what do we owe the pleasure?"

Harry simply stood silently as Hermione wrapped her arm around Harry's tightly. Harry smile at Hermione before he spoke without any touch of respect for those in front of him and said, "We are on our prefect rounds. Is there something we can do for *you* people?"

Malfoy made a move for his wand that was cut short as Harry merely arched his eyebrow menacingly and the ferret dropped his arms back to his sides slack. Umbridge spoke for the entire group who shared a brain as she said, "You truly don't understand the power I have here, do you Potter? I could have you arrested for the mere mention of a threat against a pureblood. There are statutes that govern such an action."

Harry smiled condescendingly and said, "I know your threats are the means in which you wish to control me *Delores*. I can personally guarantee that any moves you make against me during your short stint here at Hogwarts, they will be returned tenfold upon you and your little toadettes. I will not stand for your idiocy any longer and this is my final warning. Now step aside you inbred horrors and allow us to do our rounds."

Umbridge wrinkled her nose in disgust before she ordered her squad to step aside as she added, "This isn't over Potter. As soon as your precious Dumbledore is gone I will make your life hell and I'll keep you around to have some fun with you, and then as for your little mudblood girlfriend, I leave her to my squad for to do as they wish."

Harry's eyes flashed green for a moment as his magic flared. Harry's show of power forced the squad and the toad to scamper back to the safety of their common room, as Harry and Hermione shared a good laugh at the expense of the dozen pathetic excuses for witches and wizards that had just confronted them and continued on their rounds.

They reached the third floor by where they stumbled onto Fluffy first year and made their first contact with Ginny since her banishment

from Gryffindor. She looked very different in the green and silver of Slytherin but she had the same smile they had each become accustomed to in their three years of friendship with the girl.

Ginny was smiling at the pair as she noticed their presence in the room and said, "Ron told me that this is where you began piecing together the whole mystery of the sorcerer's stone. You know I really miss talking to him, and you guys for that matter. But, I guess what I did was pretty terrible so I don't deserve your pity."

Harry looked at Hermione who was barely keeping her anger in check before Harry softly said, "Ginny, your presence at the school is an example of how much we still valued our friendship. If it were Pansy Parkinson that had done the same thing, she would be sitting in Azkaban right now. Take advantage of your opportunity to do some good. We'll never be able to fully trust you again, but that doesn't mean we can't work together again in the future. Your family may be mad at you, but they're still your family and they will stick with you if you only ask for them to. As far as Ron goes, he'll take longer than the rest because along with that famous Weasley temper he also has a stubborn streak that runs for ages, as evidenced by his behavior last year when my name came out of the goblet. It'll be a long road but if you want to, I'm sure you can start your way back right now."

Hermione nodded and then added, "Harry's right Ginny. But, instead of feeling sorry for yourself you'll need to work for it and stop wasting time reminiscing about what you used to have because that isn't coming back. You are a strong witch and you can do this if you commit to it. Now please leave this hallway before we have to dock you points for being here."

Harry wrapped Hermione into a hug and said, "Think about it Ginny. It's never too late to make a difference in your life. You just have to want it."

Ginny smiled at them sadly and said, "Thanks guys, it means a lot that you are even willing to talk to me after what I did. I'll do my best to take advantage of my second chance. I'll be seeing you." Ginny slowly walked away a little more upright and with more spring in her

step since the day of her sorting. Time would only tell what Ginny Weasley would do with her chance.

The remainder of their rounds Harry and Hermione found that they really couldn't find anything to say to each other. So, they filled their awkward silences with a lot of snogs, and although if they couldn't find anything to say, they were still really happy.

Saturday morning, Harry and Hermione found themselves in the great hall very early as Hermione's subscription to the paper came flying in the talons of an owl. The paper landed in Hermione's lap and after she unfurled it she immediately paled. Harry scooted next to her as they read the horrible news on the front page.

Ministry in Hysterics as Massive Azkaban Breakout and Dementor's Disappearance Cripple Justice System

By: Rita Skeeter

Last night at 9 pm a group of men in black cloaks matching the description of deatheaters, led a massive breakout of Azkaban prison. Among the 13 escaping prisoners, were the most prominent deatheaters that were captured after the fall of he-who-must-not-be-named, including Bellatrix Lestrangle, Antonin Dolohov, Rabastan and Rudolphus Lestrangle, the recently captured Peter Pettigrew, and Augustus Rookwood.

Soon after the breakout the dementors who did not actively attempt to stop the breakout left the prison and disappeared without a trace a short amount of time later.

With the two events following so closely after the tragic events of the tri-wizard tournament and the boy-who-lived's capture of two other deatheaters, we must all question if he-who-must-not-be-named has possibly returned.

We here at the prophet hope that the ministry can coordinate its efforts with Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter in order to bring peace to the world again, and to avoid the atrocities of he-who-must-not-be-named's first reign of terror.

As soon as Harry and Hermione finished reading the paper they glanced over to the few students from Slytherin that were already up and they could see the looks of glee on their faces as they read their copies of the paper. Then Harry looked up to the headmaster as they shared a look that even someone who couldn't read minds would understand. The first blood of the war had been spilled and the light side was on the wrong side of the ledger.

A/N: Please Review. I hope you liked the chapter, I was trying to give some background as to Cho's letter and also to check in on Ginny. The breakout at Azkaban will lead to some heavy fallout at Hogwarts. Thanks for reading.

Chapter 25

Lord Voldemort was no fool and he knew when he should attack and when he should lay low. The ministry was still refusing to admit his reappearance and blamed the attacks on more rogue former deatheaters. Fudge remained adamant that Voldemort wasn't back yet, and he made a point to abandon Azkaban as the prison for the ministry and to have cells added to the ministry building itself so that it would be easier to defend in case of an attack.

Harry was to meet with Dumbledore after Remedial potions on Monday night to discuss the order and its recent business and agenda with the added burden of the dementors defection and the Azkaban breakout.

Harry woke up early Monday morning to go for his daily run and he brought along his mirror to talk to Sirius about school and the war.

Harry went for his run and lifted some weights as he worked up a good sweat and felt very relaxed as he pulled out his mirror. Harry simply said, "Sirius Black" and watched as the mirror went out of focus for a minute before Sirius appeared within the mirror.

Sirius had a big smile on his face as he beamed, "Hey kiddo, I've been waiting for you to try this out. Hermione has been talking to her parents every night and you haven't talked to me yet."

Harry looked sheepish and replied, "I'm sorry Sirius, I guess I'm still not used to having someone who cares about me that much, especially to want to talk to me on a daily basis, aside from Hermione that is."

Sirius frowned and then smiled as he said, "Well get used to it kiddo, because I'm not going anywhere and I do care about you. I know David and Elizabeth always ask Hermione why you aren't around to join her in their discussions too."

Harry nodded and then asked, "So, how are things going there?"

Sirius arched his eyebrow and asked, "Do you mean order business, or my business?"

Harry smiled and rolled his eyes before he replied, "*Your* business, Padfoot. How are Emmy and Moony?"

Sirius smiled and said, "Well, Emmy is doing good although she has been a bit bored without you around in the house to tease and to duel with. Moony has been busy with order business and keeping Tonks' hands full."

Harry laughed and said, "Yeah, Tonks does tend to be a handful, doesn't she?"

Sirius chuckled and replied, "Yes well, she is my cousin, so it doesn't surprise me in the least."

Harry's face hardened a little before he asked, "How is the guard duty on the prophecy going?"

Sirius sighed and replied, "It's pretty boring kiddo. The ministry has loosened up a little to most of the order members lately, so we can only hope that Fudge is about to give in to the inevitable and admit Voldemort's return."

Harry nodded hopefully and added with a small smile, "I hope so because I am tired of getting my named dragged through the mud whenever Fudge wants to take the heat off himself."

Sirius nodded sadly, and then brightened as though he had an epiphany of parenting before he said, "So Harry, how is school going?"

Harry smiled as he was hoping Sirius would ask, before he answered, "Oh, it's brilliant so far Padfoot. I am second in our class in Charms, Transfiguration, Care of Magical creatures, and History of Magic. I am actually first in Runes, DADA, and tied with Hermione for first in potions. I am also doing well in Herbology and Arithmancy. Astronomy is the only class we haven't had to hand anything in so far, but I am doing a good job on my star charts so far."

Sirius still smiling widely asked, "Good to hear Harry. How about your other projects? How is the DA going?"

Harry arched an eyebrow and replied, "How do you know about the DA Sirius?"

Sirius chuckled and replied, "Well, it's all Hermione talks about with her parents when you hold meetings. She keeps going on about how good you are, as a teacher in Defense. Of course, David and Elizabeth also go on about how much Hermione thinks of you too."

Harry blushed and replied, "Yes well, Hermione helps a lot with the lesson plans. Although for the rest of the meetings, I am actually writing up the lesson plans on my own. Hermione told me that I would know what spells should be taught better than her, and how the group work should be done because of my various experiences."

Sirius nodded and then asked, "So, what do you know about the Azkaban breakout and the dementors leaving?"

Harry ran his hand through his still sweaty hair and replied, "Well I have a meeting with Albus tonight so I will get some more answers then, unless you want to fill me in now."

Sirius smiled and replied, "Well, given how much Albus has told you in the past, why don't we compare the stories?"

Harry nodded and replied, "Something tells me he will tell me things you'll have no idea of, and you'll tell me things that I'll have no idea of from the stories he'll tell me. He likes to keep it so only he knows the full story although he is getting better about it with me. Albus excels in telling partial truths so it can't be construed as lying."

Sirius nodded sadly and replied, "Well, from eyewitness testimony of a surviving auror who was incidentally spared so he could tell the story, Voldemort and five death eaters arrived at the island via a portkey. The auror contingent sounded the alarm for the ministry to send backup, which arrived after the attack had been completed. This is problematic because Azkaban is supposed to be unplottable. Anyways, they arrived via portkey and immediately took down the main contingent of aurors on the island, by killing them via the killing

curse. Ten aurors were killed in a matter of five minutes and afterwards the dementors floated above the island next to the dark mark that had been conjured.”

Harry interrupted and asked, “So, the dementors were drawn towards the dark mark in the sky?”

Sirius furrowed his brow and worriedly replied, “I don’t think the order has thought about it that way, but, if Voldemort has somehow modified the dark mark to attract dementors then perhaps we should rethink our strategies following an attack. It would cripple us if we were investigating an attack and were attacked by dementors who were laid as a trap of sorts. Good observation kiddo. I’ll bring it up at the next order meeting” Harry beamed at the compliment as Sirius smiled proudly at Harry.

Sirius continued, “Well, after the dementors defected, Voldemort encountered minimal resistance from the remaining aurors and freed the prisoners who were all confirmed or suspected deatheaters with or without the dark mark. They portkeyed away from the island approximately ten minutes after they arrived and ten minutes before the ministry with backup arrived. It was an impressive display of organization and power from Voldemort and also led to the defection of the dementors, who are for all intents and purposes, are immortal soul suckers. Not a good day by any measure of the word.”

Harry sighed and nodded before he glanced at the watch Hermione had gotten him for his birthday and said, “Well Sirius, I have to go get ready for the day. I’ll talk to you after my meeting with Albus to see if we can piece together the whole story.”

Sirius smiled and replied, “Sure thing kiddo. I really enjoyed hearing from you this morning so don’t be a stranger in the future ok?”

Harry smiled and replied, “Sure thing Padfoot, have a good day.” Sirius nodded as Harry deactivated the mirror and left the room of requirements to start his day.

Harry took a long shower in the prefect’s bathroom as he took a mental survey of his day ahead and each class that he had to attend. He always kept returning to his meeting with Dumbledore and how

such a meeting would inevitably change Harry's life one way or the other, and usually for the worst.

Harry returned to the common room and was immediately greeted with a hug from Hermione who whispered in his ear, "Good morning love, are you ready for another long day of classes?"

Harry gave Hermione a kiss on the lips before he pulled away and smiled. Harry replied, "Mione, have I told you yet today, exactly how beautiful you are?"

Hermione blushed a little and replied, "No love, you haven't. But, I am receptive to hearing it."

Harry laughed and said, "Hermione, you grow more beautiful every day I see you. Would the lovely lady before me, like to accompany me to breakfast, as I carry her bag?"

Hermione giggled and replied, "As long as *my* Harry is carrying the bag, then yes, I suppose it is ok."

Harry and Hermione went down to the great hall to start another week at the greatest magical school in the world, Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry.

The great hall was still mostly empty, although those present were blissfully ignorant of the truth of the world surrounding them. Harry looked around as several young witches held the newest *Teen Witch Weekly* in their hands with a picture of Oliver Wood on the cover and with instructions on bagging the wizard of a witch's dreams.

Harry looked around the room and his good mood vanished as he could see the ignorance is bliss way of life permeating throughout the student body. There was none of the worry that should be felt at the times, such as they were. Hermione noticed the change in Harry's body language as he went from relaxed to irritated in the short time between their entrance in the great hall and sitting down at the Gryffindor table.

Hermione softly asked, "What's wrong Harry?"

Harry sighed and closed his eyes as a means of gathering himself before he quietly replied, "It's just that I looked around the great hall, and I saw everyone who believes everything the prophet and ministry say about Voldemort not being back, and I wonder how many of them will have to die before they wake up."

Hermione frowned at Harry's suddenly shift into a dark train of thought and so she played devil's advocate and replied, "Well Harry, what benefit would they have by being aware of Voldemort's return?"

Harry confidently replied, "They'll be able to prepare themselves for the war and survive."

Hermione arched her eyebrow and replied, "So, you're telling me that all of the students at the school have business fighting in the war?"

Harry sighed and replied, "No Hermione they don't; now you are twisting my words. There are only a handful of students in the school that can have a role in the war."

Hermione smiled as Ron would, when he had a checkmate in sight against Harry in wizard's chess, when she retorted, "Then what can be possibly gained from terrorizing a bunch of people by announcing a war that many for them will die in regardless of what they do?"

Harry resignedly said, "Ok fine I get your point. I guess I think that honesty is the best course of action in most cases, and this just might be one that requires we withhold the truth as long as the ministry does. It is the ministry's role to prepare the general public of this isn't it?" Hermione nodded as a smile bloomed across her face as Harry poured himself some tea and grabbed some toast and marmalade.

Hermione smiled and said, "So, are you ready to meet your match tonight in Remedial?"

Harry arched his eyebrow and replied, "Well love, if you manage to match me tonight with your shields then you will have to make a lot of progress from your last attempt."

Hermione pouted and said, "It's not my fault that you happen to be a master Legilimens."

Harry smiled and replied consolingly, "I know Hermione, and to be honest you are making incredible progress considering you have only been working on this since September. I have no doubts that you will be a match for Professor Snape before too much longer, and I will probably follow soon after."

Hermione beamed and said, "Thank you Harry." Harry nodded and they quietly talked about Harry's conversation with Sirius earlier in the morning.

Hermione smiled when Harry talked about how David and Elizabeth wanted to talk to Harry too. She simply said, "What can I say love? My parents love you. My dad talks about you like you are the son he never had, and my mom thinks you are so sweet and gentle." Hermione arched her eyebrow and added, "Merlin do you have the wool pulled over their eyes."

Harry managed to look as innocently as possible and replied, "Well I happen to think I am rather sweet and gentle but, if you don't think I am, well I guess I'll stop trying at all. As for your father, well, we just have happened to hit it off quite well. He is a very interesting guy once you get to know him."

Hermione smiled sweetly and said, "Harry, sweetheart I never said you weren't gentle and sweet. As for my dad, he happens to be a very good judge of character also." Harry spit out the tea he was drinking and dissolved into a painful sounding coughing attack, which prompted Hermione to pat his back and apologize for teasing him for the rest of breakfast.

Classes for the day went by rather quickly as Harry thought about Hermione's words on the war from breakfast. He had to fight his urge to rebel against those who hid the truth from him in the past and now he was taking that same stance now. The primary difference being that the war was his to win and for everyone else the war was theirs to survive and nothing more. By the time they reached the dungeons for remedial potions, Harry had adapted Hermione's beliefs as an unfortunate but necessary consequence of the war ahead of him.

Severus Snape had found his role in the war becoming increasingly difficult to maintain because unlike the first war he had truly found

that he believed in the cause of Albus and Harry. The truly surprising thing for Severus was that he found that there was much more to Harry than his celebrity and that he was in no way James Potter like he had originally feared. In fact, the more time he spent with Harry and Hermione in their informal training sessions he found a lot more of Albus Dumbledore in Harry than any other comparison.

Hermione on the other hand remained an enigma to Severus Snape. She was much more easy going this year than she had been in the past, and although she was studious like Lily Potter, there something else to the brown eyed bushy hair witch that had shared a mutual affection with young Potter that Severus Snape had yet to figure out. She had been diligent in her occlumency training and even Snape was impressed with her progress in just over a month. Of course unlike himself, she had the benefit of two skilled Legilimens training her, from which one could provide her with a gentle hand and praise in Potter, and he could be as cruel as possible in attacking her defenses under the guise of Voldemort.

After Remedial Harry parted ways with Hermione once he walked her back to the common room, more for his own peace of mind than hers and made his way to the headmaster's office. Harry entered the office after the gargoyle slid out of the way without the prompt of the password meaning that Albus was all ready for Harry's arrival.

Harry entered the office and was promptly greeted by Fawkes who trilled joyfully for a few seconds before Harry greeted the phoenix with gentle rub of its head. Harry turned to see the headmaster chuckling before he said, "Harry, of all the great wizards Fawkes has met, I dare say you are his favorite, even above me. I think you may have yourself a companion in him, once I pass on to the next great adventure." Harry winced at the mention of Dumbledore's death but kept his emotions in check otherwise.

Albus continued as though he didn't notice Harry's reaction, "However, that is not why you are here tonight and I think that I should keep this as brief as possible so that you may get some sleep tonight."

Harry nodded slowly as a small smile creased his lips slightly before he asked, "Sir, what really happened at Azkaban. Something tells me that the prophet left some important details out, either by choice, or because the truth was withheld from them also."

Albus eyes twinkled as Harry kept a carefully neutral expression on his face and his occlumency shields at high power, as he felt the gently pressure of Dumbledore's Legilimency test them and were easily repelled. Dumbledore smiled at his own failure and Harry's success before he said, "I believe with the memory I extracted from the surviving auror and also some from some prisoners we can completely review the events of the night and find the answers you seek together. I have not attempted to do so yet, because I awaited your presence so that we could do it together."

Harry made a courteous smile and said, "I'd appreciate that sir." Albus nodded and stood from his seat as Harry followed him over to his intricately carved and decorated pensieve.

Albus simply said, "This first memory is of the auror that Tom allowed to live, and he gave the account that the order knows of. The prophet in their brief article chronicling the event also used his account. Remember to keep your eyes open to pick up any small details you can while in the memory." Harry nodded as they each dunked their heads in the bowl filled with the silvery liquid.

Harry and Dumbledore found themselves in a guard checkpoint just outside the main perimeter of the prison. Harry went out an open door and watched as Voldemort and his death eaters simply arrived out of thin air on their portkey just outside the building.

Voldemort made the same evil laugh Harry remembered from the graveyard before he said to the lead death eater, "Lucius, I wish to make an example out of the aurors on this island. I will handle these men while you relay my message to the dementors as I instructed. Once your task is completed begin the process of freeing my loyal followers."

Harry watched as the aurors accompanied by Dumbledore exited the guard post and engaged Voldemort in a hail of spellfire. Voldemort merely conjured an impressive shield blocking the various spells the

aurors used. The shield would block anything short of the killing curse so Voldemort laughed as the aurors rained their spells upon him.

Voldemort used his non-wand hand and flicked his wrist softly and watched as every auror dropped their wand. The short break before they summoned their wands back was all the time Voldemort needed as a steady volley of killing curses were fired which all hit their mark killing every auror except for the one to remain to tell the story.

After he had killed the aurors save one Voldemort said, "Now you will live to tell the story of this night, and inform the world of my return. Watch as my true power is revealed." Harry and Dumbledore watched as Voldemort looked towards the sky, which was lit with the dark mark after a moment. They then watched as the dementors flocked to the mark and hovered menacingly above the prison.

Voldemort cackled as Harry stood near him and watched the dark wizard grip his wand and say, "Now I must join my newly freed followers for a moment." He glanced back at the now shaking auror who had clearly wet himself in the presence of Voldemort, and said, "I want you to remember this moment until the day you die. Which fortunately for you isn't today thanks to my mercy." Voldemort had one of his death eaters grab the auror and follow him into the prison to bear witness to his greatness.

Harry snorted next to Voldemort and muttered, "More like thanks to your massive ego." Dumbledore chuckled as they followed Voldemort deep into the bowels of Azkaban, as he didn't even bother to stop before he launched killing curses at the occasional auror. They finally reached a large opening where the freed death eaters waited for their master to grace them with his presence. Voldemort greeted them as warmly as he could muster before he pulled out the same portkey and said once more to the trembling auror, "Remember me.", with a swirl of colors and a brief gust of wind Voldemort and his 20 death eaters vanished into thin air.

Harry and Albus pulled out of the bowl and Harry said to the headmaster, "Sir, how long have you known that Lucius Malfoy was a death eater?"

Dumbledore sighed and replied, "I was the one who brought him up on charges at the first deatheater trials and voted against his acquittal although he had sufficient monetary influence to sway enough votes despite me. I have not had any opportunity to try him again since then as he has grown adept at hiding his evidence as witnessed by the chamber of secrets." Harry nodded thoughtfully after the explanation going over the events in his head once again.

Harry then remembered the dementors and the mark and asked, "Sir is it possible to create a spell to attract dementors?"

Albus sighed and said, "Yes Harry, I see you drew the same conclusions about the mark as I did. It appears Voldemort somehow fed the ambient magic of the mark to the dementors much like a soul. A very ingenious, albeit evil, bit of spell craftsmanship. However, I digress, are you ready to go into a few more memories of the night?"

Harry smiled and said, "Yes sir."

As they bent down to enter the pensieve once again, Harry could only think to himself, "I think it's time for Tom to have a little bit of his own medicine." Once again they dipped their heads into the silvery substance and took the trip down memory lane.

A/N: Please Review. I am taking a little break from updating this story until the coming weekend. Next chapter, will be the other memories from the Azkaban breakout and what they mean. Thanks for the reviews and keep reading.

Chapter 26As Harry and Dumbledore prepared to enter another memory of the Azkaban breakout Albus softly said, "The other two memories are from two prisoners who had cells down by where the freed prisoners were held. Based upon the prisoners' countenances I believe what they saw was very traumatic for some reason so prepare yourself for the worst." Harry nodded, carefully prepared to add another horror to his rapidly expanding stable of such thoughts.

Albus caught the look in Harry's eyes and added, "I assure you that you have seen worse Harry. The men I speak of have been subjected to the dementors for many years and they know of nothing but horrors. The things we will see will be rather twisted despite that, and I admit I only show you this because you are mature and wise beyond your years." Harry nodded before they each dunked their heads into the bowl vanishing into the memory as they had before.

Harry and Albus found themselves standing outside of a cell in the lower portion where the security prisoners were placed. Albus glanced around and spoke to Harry as he looked elsewhere, "Since these memories are of the same events just of a different perspective they will be spliced together to give us nearly unlimited motion around the lower level. We must keep our eyes open for any names or information that may be useful in the future." Harry replied with a short nod before they spaced themselves apart in order to gather as much information as possible.

Harry took a position by the stairs that led to the main floor of the lower level as Albus stationed himself by the cells of the escaped death eaters.

Harry watched as Lucius Malfoy as he had recognized him earlier come into the room with his head held like Harry had seen Draco's so many times before. He removed his mask and revealed his smirking visage before he killed the only two aurors standing guard in the lower level with killing curses to their backs. Harry pulled out his wand and gripped it tightly as though he could actually hex the mental image of the smarmy bastard.

Harry continued to watch as Lucius manufactured a strange orb that lit up when he tapped it with his wand and unlocked the doors to the

cells of the deatheaters freed. Harry glanced over towards Dumbledore and sent a wordless query which Dumbledore mentally answered with, "I'll explain later."

Harry sighed and then moved to the middle of the lower level where the various deatheaters were congregating awaiting the presence of their master. Harry was visibly cataloging the various mannerisms of the deatheaters hoping to garner some advantage. Albus was doing the same thing as he made a point to catalog the relative health of each deatheater stumbling out of their cells, particularly intent on watching Bellatrix and her interactions. He noticed she didn't immediately go to her husband but stood alone as though she already knew where her loyalties laid and they weren't with her husband any longer.

Harry stood and watched as Wormtail cowered in the corner as though he was afraid of the other deatheaters even though he was amongst their ranks. Harry asked Albus, "So do you think that Tom really wants to have followers like him or does he just use him like he does pretty much everyone else."

Albus' eyes twinkled with a spark Harry and rarely seen before when he answered, "You see the inherent difference between us and Tom now, don't you Harry?"

Harry nodded as he was aware of the important lesson Dumbledore was sharing with him about leadership. Harry replied, "For Tom all that matters are the end result and he doesn't really care about the how and why as long as he gets it. It's why he resorted to murder at such a young age and attempted to fulfill the prophecy when I was still a defenseless baby."

Albus smiled and shook his head in appreciation of his young friends thoughtful answer before they watched said dark wizard enter the room with a couple of his deatheaters in tow.

Voldemort looked around with a rare smile creasing the sides of his face before he coolly said, "My faithful followers, we find ourselves in a very favorable position at the moment. The ministry refuses to admit my rebirth so we have a precious amount of time to rebuild my army, so that purebloods may take their rightful place at the forefront

of wizardkind once again. We will work in the shadows although one task must be dealt with soon. I will inform those of you I deem trustworthy enough what the task is that I wish undertaken. Mudbloods and the like will bow before our feet before we destroy them and all I ask from you my most faithful, is to keep your faith and follow my orders when given. Welcome back, my children.”

Voldemort then walked forward to Bella and whispered in her ear which Harry thankfully heard thanks to his enhanced hearing, “Potter has been a thorn in my side for far too long. He has somehow surrounded himself with those he can trust so we must begin picking them off one by one. We will start with the pathetic friends of his parents he associates with. Then we will kill the muggle loving fool, followed by his little pet mudblood which will destroy him. Then when I have weakened him enough I will kill him and my reign will truly begin.”

Bella made a scary skeletal smile as though it pained her to smile after all of her time in Azkaban before she kissed Voldemort passionately and replied, “We shall do as you wish master. But, I want to kill his mudblood.”

Voldemort laughed as he conjured the portkey and simply said, “For you and you only Bella, I promise.” Harry’s heart rate raced as he watched Voldemort and the death eaters portkey back to an unknown site.

Harry walked over to Albus who was frowning thoughtfully before he noticed Harry and pulled them out of the memory.

Albus had overheard Voldemort’s conversation with Bella thanks to a well placed extendable ear he had procured from the twins. He expected Harry to be sullen and upset at Voldemort’s plans but was surprised to see Harry leaning against his desk with a smirk on his face.

Albus sat in his chair before Fawkes flew to his shoulder and with a suddenly guarded expression on his face as he steeped his fingers and he said, “Harry, do you know something I don’t?”

Harry's smirk vanished replaced with a look of pure steel that momentarily stunned Dumbledore with its intensity. Harry simply replied, "Tom won't take anyone else from me sir. I guarantee he will pay for just thinking of trying it. It's time I called in a favor from someone sir. I also figured out what the orb was so I don't really need your help with that. But, for now keep your eyes peeled on Slytherin tower and a tracing charm on the ferret with a nice kernel of false information I am about to plant."

Dumbledore looked at Harry with an arched eyebrow before he said, "You've been saving whatever you plan on doing for just this occasion haven't you?"

The smirk returned on Harry's face before he replied, "Maybe." With those words Harry swished his cloak and disappeared from the room causing Albus to arch and eyebrow and smile to himself as Harry asserted himself as the true leader of the battle ahead.

Harry immediately made his way to a spot he knew Malfoy would be and sent his patronus to Hermione as he concentrated on her alone. If his plan were to work he would have to make Malfoy believe that everything he heard was the truth and not a clever ruse to send Voldemort a message. In a matter of 5 minutes which Harry assumed was the minimum amount of time it would take for Hermione to get there they had already discussed the plan and Hermione congratulated him with a kiss before they made their way to the library and their special table with a couple of requisite meaningless books in hand for some revenge.

They reached their spot and chatted about classes for awhile before Harry caught the subtle smell of hair gel and cheap cologne that meant the arrival of their least favorite ferret. Harry caught Hermione's eye and the plan went into effect. They chatted for a few minutes about something inane in the latest History of Magic assignment before Harry casually said, "So love, are your parents going to be picking up their clothes at your place tomorrow morning before returning to my place?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Yes Harry I think they are. I'll have to have them grab that black dress you like so much. Maybe we can go out over Christmas break and if you play your cards right...."

Harry chuckled believably and replied, "I love it when you ask me to play games with you." Harry could imagine Malfoy stifling a gag reflex before they felt his scent leaving the library concealed under an invisibility cloak like Harry's.

Harry and Hermione immediately grabbed their books as Harry was content the headmaster had already placed a tracking charm on the ferret so they could tell where he and his little tid bit of information were going.

Harry and Hermione walked hand in hand to the headmaster's office to fully inform the old wizard on the plan that had been flawlessly executed, and the need for a trap to be set at the Granger's house in order to send a message to Voldemort on the true wisdom of his plan.

They quickly made their way to the office and smiled as the gargoyle slid out of the way indicating the old wizard already expected their presence. Harry and Hermione made their way up to his office where he was already congregated with Mad Eye-Moody and Professor McGonagall discussing the potential implications of Harry's actions.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and smiled before Harry cleared his throat signaling their entrance. Dumbledore quickly ended the conversation and warmly said, "Ah yes, Harry and Hermione, you were just the people we needed."

Hermione smiled as her eyes twinkled almost as much as Harry or Albus' did and replied, "What can we help you with sir?"

Albus arched his eyebrow and let out a small chuckle before he replied, "I believe you both know of what I speak."

Harry spoke next as he said, "In short, we planted a false tip with Malfoy who just so happened to be snooping on us in our normal spot in the library like I knew he would. Tomorrow morning we indicated that David and Elizabeth would be returning to their home to pick up some clothes. We figured that Tom would never pass up the

opportunity of getting them and that we could send a message that we know what he is up to and that he'll have to find new ways of getting information. In essence, making the junior deatheaters a useless quantity in their present position of spying here. Thereby either forcing them to leave the school to join the ranks or to force them to shut up."

Moody looked like Christmas had come early while McGonagall was fighting to keep a smile of her face as Dumbledore spoke for both of them and said, "Very good Harry. We will deal with the trap for tomorrow morning and inform you of our results tomorrow evening. For now get some sleep, I will hold congratulations for later."

Harry awoke the next morning feeling a little less excited that he had the previous night suddenly feeling the crushing possibility that despite his plans design something could happen and someone could get killed from the order. Harry went to the room and took out his guilt on the track and the weights as he doubled his normal reps until his arms burned as they pumped the equivalent of battery acid through his veins.

He went and grabbed a long hot shower trying to wash away the feeling but even a long shower couldn't free Harry from his demons. He returned to the common room to find Hermione in her usual morning spot reading a random book she had checked out of the library.

Hermione immediately recognized the look on Harry's face as his pain even showed clearly in his emerald green gaze. She knew when Harry got like this all she could do was offer comfort and ride out the storm which was exactly what she had planned as she was still consciously trying to make up for her birthday and how she had treated him.

Hermione softly said, "I know what's bothering you Harry, and I also know you won't feel any better until tonight. I also know I'll spend the entire day trying to convince you that anything that happens will not be your fault."

Harry nodded and picked Hermione up and sat underneath her before she rejoined him on his lap. He sighed softly as he ran his

hands through his still wet hair and said, "I know and I love you for it. I just wish that things were simpler is all. I mean I made a life or death decisions last night without even thinking about it. Does that make me careless, irresponsible, or stupid?"

Hermione glared at Harry for a moment before she harshly replied, "No, Harry it makes you a human being. You didn't make a mistake and by doing this you will be saving lives in the long run."

Harry closed his eyes in resignation to the truth of Hermione's words before he sighed once again and simply said, "Let's go grab some breakfast before the great hall fills up."

Breakfast was a quiet affair as Harry still fought to keep from sinking deeper into his hole of guilt he had created. Hermione merely held his hand and gave him the occasional kiss on the cheek to let him know she was there for him.

At the Grangers residence Sirius, Remus, Tonks and Kingsley (who had the day off), and Moody waited for the deatheaters arrival that would signal the trap they had set to be sprung.

Sirius and Kingsley had taken the polyjuice to assume the forms of David and Elizabeth and the illusion had been carried as far to have a transfigured trash can moonlighting as a car outside the house as well.

Moody was stationed under an invisibility cloak near the entrance to the house as Remus was outside prepared to bring up the anti-apparition wards after the deatheaters arrival. Tonks was inside prepared to jump in as soon as she was needed.

They didn't have to wait too long for the trap to be sprung as 6 deatheaters apparated just outside the house and Remus could feel the smirks on their faces as they spotted the car in the driveway assuming they had made the trip unguarded.

The deatheaters entered the room led by Rabastan Lestrangle a recent Azkaban escapee and McNair who Harry and Hermione had become quite acclimated with before Buckbeak's escape third year. As soon as the deatheaters entered the house Rabastan said, "We

must move quickly, the order will not be far behind after we let off the mark. But, that doesn't mean we can't have some fun with the mudblood's parents."

The deatheaters all entered the house and found Sirius and Kingsley packing in a conveniently perfect position for an ambush. A fact that the deatheaters never realized until their numbers had been halved with a few well placed *reductos* to deatheater heads. McNair and Rabastan survived the first volley and attempted to return fire to their unseen enemies and then thought better of it and attempted to apparate away. They were both disarmed in their moment of panic, and the third deatheater standing was soon sitting and would be permanently following a fourth *reducto* to end a deatheater's life in a short period..

After the two deatheaters were revived, Verisateum was administered and a few very important facts were unearthed. First, Voldemort planned an assault upon the ministry and more importantly the department of mysteries in an attempt to get his hands on the prophecy. The attack was planned for sometime in May or June and would be coordinated with several other attacks to spread the ministry thin.

The other little useful bit of information came when it was revealed that Umbridge was indeed amongst the rank of deatheaters at Hogwarts and Sirius made a mental note to warn Harry via the mirror later. In all the missions had been an overwhelming success and after Rabastan and McNair were transported to the ministry. Although it was under the guise that Tonks and Kingsley had captured them on their day off this was technically the truth, although all specifics had been rearranged to suit their interests.

As Harry trudged through the day certain his plan had killed someone else he knew, like his suggestion to share the cup with Cedric had. Harry knew that such thoughts were completely wasteful and did nothing but torment himself even more than he already was, he couldn't let go of the weight of having a few more souls resting on his shoulders.

Hermione did as she promised and provided Harry with every comfort she could although even she knew it did nothing but prevent him from fully falling to his guilt which she hoped was entirely unfounded and might even give him the confidence and wisdom to understand that he would have to make more similar decisions in the future and to realize he couldn't let it consume him as it was now.

Finally, they finished their remedial and had a break before astronomy so they went to the headmaster's office to be officially debriefed on their first order mission that they solely organized and orchestrated aside from its completion.

They walked up the stairs as the gargoyle continued its trend of sliding out of the way for Harry and Hermione as they were greeted by the majority of the order with several handshakes, smiled, and pats on the back for their brilliant plan to strike back at Voldemort.

They found their seats at a conjured table next to Albus who merely gestured them over to their seats with a smile and a hand gesture.

Harry and Hermione took their seats before Moody rose and briefed Harry and Hermione on the missions overwhelming success even having captured one of the Azkaban escapees and McNair. They mentioned that no spells had been fired by the deatheaters in the attack and this fact more than anything else put Harry's mind to rest a little.

They were also informed of what had been learned with the aid of Verisateum and every order member flinched at the look on Harry and Hermione's faces when it was mentioned that Umbridge was a deatheater. The last remaining obstacle had been cleared for the pair that would lead to the ultimate destruction of the foul useless creature that the two coyotes would hunt and put out of her misery.

Only one other person in the room was capable of having such a predatory look grace their face and he was in complete agreement with his brethren. Sirius knew as well although his reasons for knowing were less animalistic and more paternal. The war was finally being fought by both sides and Harry vowed it would end before another he loved would die even if he couldn't make such a vow and

realistically keep it, the look on Harry's face nearly convinced everyone in the room that it was possible.

A/N: Please Review. Tell me what you think of the new improved fighting order. Voldemort will strike and the order will continue to strike back. I mean it is a war and it will be fought accordingly. Thanks for reading and reviewing.

Chapter 27

The third DA meeting of the year also incidentally fell on the anniversary of several less than savory things in Harry's short life. The fallout from the orders ambush of the death eaters had fortunately come across the intelligence lines provided by Snape as nothing more than a calculated misjudgment on the order contingent guarding Hermione's parents. In fact this was a blessing in disguise because it achieved the end result of driving Voldemort and his followers underground and prevented any more attacks for the foreseeable future.

Classes were going rather well as Harry and Hermione were a couple of weeks ahead on their assignments and had also managed to basically finish their revisions for their OWLs aside from any new material they would learn in classes before their tests.

As Harry and Hermione started their day they were sitting in the great hall. Hermione could tell the memories of Harry's past were bothering him somewhat and yet he seemed to be dealing with it better than usual.

Hermione grasped Harry's hand gently as he prepared to grab some toast. She softly asked, "What are you thinking about?"

Harry smiled slightly and replied, "Nothing bad actually. I was just thinking about everything that has happened today in the past, and I've gotten to know you good enough to know that was actually what you were asking me. It's ok I won't break on you today."

Hermione smiled and replied, "Ok then love, what things in the past were you thinking about?"

Harry smiled for a moment before he replied, "Well I know my mum and dad died today but I understand what they did that night now."

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand and softly asked, "Why is that Harry?"

Harry frowned slightly before he replied, "They were just protecting the most important person in their lives. I know that if we had a child I would do anything to protect them too."

Hermione nodded and then decided to push the conversation to a slightly more pleasant memory, "I also happen to remember a certain someone jumping on the back of a troll saving a bucktooth know-it-all on Halloween a few years back."

Harry chuckled and then replied seriously, "It was the smartest thing I ever did. Have I ever told you why I came to save you?"

Hermione shrugged and replied, "You kind of told me that you realized I had been in the bathroom and you decided I needed to be warned. I've kind of figured you had to force Ron to come along even though neither of you knew the troll would already be in the bathroom when you got there."

Harry smiled and replied, "Well there was a lot more to it than that." Hermione arched her eyebrow and motioned for Harry to continue wordlessly, "The first time I met you on the train you were so different from any other person I'd ever met. I mean when I was at muggle school none of the girls would even talk to me because they were afraid of getting beaten up by Dudley's female clones. Then Hagrid came for me, and he told me I was a wizard, which was great, but even then I had to be famous so I still couldn't meet people who liked me for me."

Harry sighed and rubbed his temples before Hermione squeezed his hand urging him to continue. Harry glanced up and gave her a grateful smile before he said, "Then I got on the train without a clue of what was expected of me and I met Ron who I admit was more curious about meeting the boy-who-lived than anything else. Well since I'd never really had any friends regardless of their reasons I decided to do what I could to keep him around. Then you entered the compartment and asked about the toad. I have to admit the way you talked to the both of us threw me for a loop but in a good way. I always wanted to be smarter and better than I was when I was younger because I wanted someone to compliment me for doing a good job and to be honest the Dursleys never even thought about me

being good at something except for wasting their air. You were a bit of a know-it-all but you appeared to be so nervous and yet confident at the same time. I guess I realized then that I wanted to get to know you even if we couldn't be friends. Unfortunately, I was so concerned about keeping my first friend, my own age at least, that I didn't defend you when I should have."

Harry frowned slightly as a bit of buried guilt surfaced before he quashed it and continued, "When you cast *wingardium leviosa* in class I thought it was brilliant that you could do magic so well and I was about to compliment you when I noticed Ron was angry about it. Then Ron was talking about you after class when you heard it and it obviously hurt your feelings a lot. I admit I spent the rest of the day wondering why I was so scared of offending Ron when he was doing the same kinds of things to you that Dudley did to me. I finally figured that I would stop being such a wimp and see if you would be my friend when he heard you had been crying in the bathroom after Ron said that. Then Quirrel freed the troll and I just knew I had to go to you and help you. I honestly couldn't tell you why except that I needed to help you. Ron wanted to go on an adventure with the boy-who-lived or he never would have come for you. When we got to the bathroom and the troll was already there I knew I had to do something to help you so I jumped on the troll's back."

Harry chuckled slightly at the memory before he added, "In hindsight, magic might have been a better route to go than jumping on the trolls back, but I guess things worked out alright anyways. When you lied to McGonagall about what happened I knew then and there that you were different from Ron and I mean that in all of the best ways possible."

Hermione smiled and she released his hand and said, "I wonder how different things had been if I had been the one that had joined you in the compartment instead of Ron? Maybe you might have studied harder instead of skiving off and playing chess or some other nonsense."

Harry shrugged and replied, "I can't really complain about where we are now can you?" Hermione nodded quickly and Harry smiled before he added, "Honestly, I think I needed friends more than anything else

when I got here. You have really been my only true friend since I've been here, and you have no idea how much it has meant to me."

Hermione put her hands on Harry's face and gave him a brief kiss on the lips before she said, "Harry it has meant about as much to you as it has meant to me." She got a mischievous grin on her face before she said, "I mean if you hadn't saved me from the troll I never would have been able to read all of the books I have."

Harry chuckled and replied, "I'm glad to see you have your priorities straight love."

As the great hall filled up Harry and Hermione were joined at the Gryffindor table by Parvati, Lavender, and Neville as they chatted about the Halloween feast and Neville excitedly talked about the day's assignment for Herbology.

By the end of breakfast Harry and Hermione walked hand in hand to the Arithmancy classroom in the archive wing of the school. Harry had found that although he was nowhere as good at the subject as Hermione, he did find he was one of the better students in the class. He even found he could offer different perspectives to solve problems than Hermione and that he helped her from time to time in the class. Professor Vector had taken a liking to Harry and he even heard the occasional cough that sounded like "Teacher's pet" from a few of the less conspicuous Ravenclaws in the back of the room.

On Halloween the class was no different as they were assigned to pair up and solve a complex series of equations relating how the physical manifestation of certain charms could vary greatly depending on the witch or wizard casting them.

Harry said, "Well why don't we take the example of the summoning charm. I can extend the range of the spell to almost two miles now barring any wards. You can cast your for success from about a mile away which is very impressive in its own right. So we need to take our power constants and determine the coefficient of spell efficacy by plugging our constants in a conversion equation right?"

Hermione smiled as she was scribbling exactly what Harry had been saying and solving the equation as Harry continued to speak. She

replied, "Yes Harry, and then we need to plug this in to Rowena's formula of manifestation to make our conclusions."

Harry nodded before she added with a smirk, "You know Harry, I think you might be the second smartest person in here."

Harry laughed which caused Vector to glare at them before she noticed how much work they had completed on their parchment and simply nodded and smiled at her prized pupils. Harry finally replied, "I would try to argue, but I'll take a compliment from a brilliant witch when I can get it."

They finished their assignments, handed them in as they were dismissed for the day and after a slow walk towards the transfiguration classroom where Harry stole several snogs in the various nooks and crannies in the castle. They finally arrived to the room about 15 minutes before class was to begin as Hermione silently mused if they had set some sort of record for their trip being the slowest ever between the two rooms.

Harry always savored transfiguration on Wednesdays because he had taken the throne from Hermione in the class and it had become a friendly competition to see who could best apply the theory taught on Tuesday in Wednesday's practical aspect.

McGonagall was sitting at the front of the empty room as two of her favorite students entered the room holding hands as Harry easily carried both bags as he had obviously packed on a lot of muscle since he first stepped foot into Hogwarts. In fact, Minerva mused to herself, *I'm just happy he found Hermione before the girls really started throwing themselves at his feet, or the poor dear's head might have exploded from all of the attention. If he had kept it up he probably would have gotten hexed by Hermione. But now, they are easily the most powerful students in the school and they are in love.* Her lips curled up slightly into a small smile which Harry and Hermione noticed as they pulled their books and parchment out and walked up to her with amusement and questions dancing in their eyes.

Harry asked with a slight smirk, "Hello professor, would you mind sharing with us what you find so amusing?"

Minerva smiled and replied, "Oh nothing important you two. I am just happy you two finally got the good sense to get together that is all."

Hermione smiled brightly and gave Harry a peck on the cheek before she cheekily replied, "Well Professor, if Harry hadn't said anything by the end of last year, I planned on transfiguring him into a newt." Harry barked out a laugh as Minerva chuckled before they took their seats as the other students began filling the room.

When the final bell sounded Minerva began, "Today we will be practicing our transfiguration skills to animate an inanimate object. This transfiguration is very similar to enchantment although the intention of the two skills differ somewhat. Once you have successfully completed the task described on Tuesday call me over and I will award your grade for the day. Once you have completed the assignment you may work on homework or leave."

Harry and Hermione pulled out their rocks and transfigured their rocks into a pair of coyote carvings which caused each of them to laugh. With the flick of their wands the coyotes began walking around on their first try. They played with their coyotes for awhile hopeful not to bring any more attention upon themselves than already was. They often downplayed their abilities in class because it led to open jealousy from the students around them.

Minerva watched them from her desk stopping on their table and watching for just a little bit longer on their table than the others in the class. She watched amusedly as they played with their coyotes for nearly a half an hour stealing the occasional kiss as they actually looked like their own age for once. The rest of the class was having difficulty with the task which really didn't surprise her because it was a hard skill to master although Harry and Hermione did so on their first try.

Finally, she figured they might enjoy some time alone before lunch and she walked to their table and said, "Ms. Granger, Mr. Potter I see you have finally completed the task. You have also transfigured your rocks into something else. That will be an O for the day. Feel free to leave or do some other homework here. Your assignment for next Tuesday is in your syllabus."

She then bent down and whispered so only they could hear, "Of course I already know you have that done for a week haven't you?" Harry and Hermione nodded as they transfigured their coyotes back into rocks and gathered their supplies in their bags before they walked out of the room hand in hand anxious to grab an early lunch before their creatures class with Grubbly-Plank.

As they entered the great hall Harry absently noted that the only other ones eating an early lunch were the first years from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. They sat down and grabbed their mincemeat pies that had been made for lunch. As they sat and ate in companionable silence Hermione finally brought something up she had been putting off for nearly two months.

Hermione looked into Harry's eyes pleadingly which caused Harry to immediately agree to anything that followed, "Harry, would you like to be the vice-president of S.P.E.W.?" Harry arched his eyebrow as Hermione nervously continued as she began to wring her hands, "I just got the charter approved by Umbridge yesterday although I had to add an asinine line about house elves being inferior in it. It's not like the charter is anything other than a piece of paper though."

Harry put his hands around Hermione's and gently said, "I would love to 'Mione. When do we have our first meeting?"

Hermione smiled up at Harry brightly before she said, "Well I figured we could manage with only one meeting a month. It's not like we will have many members and we can organize most of our events outside of class in our spare time."

Harry arched his eyebrow and replied, "Ah spare time; whatever is that?"

Hermione lightly punched Harry's rather hard arm and gave him a quick kiss in appreciation of that fact before she said, "I guess we have to see if Ron still wants to be a member don't we?"

Harry winced although not as much as he might have earlier in the year because his relationship with Ron had returned to what it was before his actions of the previous year, but now Harry put far less importance on it than he had in the past.

They were eventually joined by the ginger haired person that had been of conversation a few minutes earlier. Harry simply asked, "Oy Ron, do you want to remain a member of S.P.E.W. this year?"

Ron shook his head and replied, "No thanks guys. I am too busy with classes and Quidditch to worry about something else. Thanks for asking though." Harry and Hermione nodded maintaining looks of neutrality towards the former best friend who was currently a friend albeit not a terribly close one. In fact they were both very happy Ron had turned down their offer because it was one less distraction to worry about having for the group that was small but at least united.

They finished their lunch and made their way down to creatures. Although they both missed seeing Hagrid as frequently as they used to, they did not miss the dangerous creatures he so brazenly had for use in his classes. Grubbly-Plank often had interesting and usually less dangerous creatures for class, and the assignments in the class were usually rather easy and informative too. Their previous class the professor had mentioned a special treat for the next class, which if Hagrid was still teaching would have meant something dangerous, but with Grubbly-plank it meant something rare or unusual.

They made their way outside of the castle as Hermione reclaimed possession of her bag from Harry. Since Hermione's birthday she had made a point to show Harry that although she appreciated his help she also liked doing things for herself too. They reached the clearing beyond Hagrid's hut where the class used to meet and found the professor locking up a large cage and covering it with a disillusionment charm before she embarrassedly saw Harry and Hermione approaching.

Harry caught the elderly witch's reaction and simply said, "Don't worry professor we didn't see anything."

Grubbly-Plank smiled and lit her pipe before she said, "Yes well, I suppose I can tell you that our little surprise is nothing more than a young unicorn that volunteered to be seen. The only reason I have it in the cage is for some mystery."

Harry and Hermione nodded and took a seat on the side of the hill relaxing as they watched the other Gryffindor's and Slytherins file

down towards their meeting place. The remainder of the class was spent trying to get the unicorn to come close enough to any of the Slytherins or Gryffindor boys to let it pet it. Harry had finally managed the task much to the delight of Grubbly-Plank and the female Gryffindor's in the class as though there had been some sort of a silent bet going that he would be the only male the unicorn would allow to touch it.

As they prepared to head back to the castle for another short snog march they caught Hagrid waving at them subtly to follow him into the forest. Harry and Hermione shrugged before they followed him into the forest. They finally caught up to Hagrid who was very excited and Hermione asked, "Are we going to see Grawp?"

Hagrid stopped in his tracks and turned towards them before he simply said, "'Arry, 'Ermione you are the only ones to know that he is out here ok?" They both nodded and Hagrid continued, "He won't try to hurt you, but you both need to be careful around em." Hagrid turned back around and continued to take his large steps towards a clearing in the distance.

They finally reached the clearing and with a quick glance at his watch he noticed they had about an hour until Herbology was to begin. They finally laid their eyes upon a fifteen foot man who frankly made Hagrid appear like Harry or Hermione in relation to their giant friend. Hermione unconsciously took a step behind Harry who merely slid his wand into his hand as a safety against the mountainous presence in front of them.

Hagrid smiled at the man mountain and said, "ey Grawpy, I want you to meet 'Arry, and 'Ermione."

Grawp listened intently before he started clapping his hands and said, "I wanna play with Harry and Hermy."

Hagrid beamed at Harry and Hermione before he turned back to Grawp and said, "You need to be gentle with them Grawpy. They are my friends and I don't want them hurt. If you hurt them they won't want to come back."

Grawp made a slow determined head nod before Hagrid motioned them towards Grawp. Hermione stood slightly behind Harry and to his side but she was ready to dive behind Harry at a moments notice if Grawp got out of control.

Harry walked up to Grawp as he left Hermione a safe distance behind and he strongly said, "Hello Grawp, how are you today?"

Grawp appeared to visibly mull over the question before he answered, "Grawpy good Harry. How is Harry?"

Harry smiled back at Hagrid who was beaming with pride at his brother before Harry turned back to Grawp and answered, "I am good Grawp. Thank you for asking. I'd like you to meet my girlfriend Hermione." Harry motioned for Hermione to come stand next to him.

Hermione tentatively made her way up to Harry and when Harry grabbed her hand and gave her a reassuring smile she said, "Hello Grawp. I'm Hermione, how are you today?"

Grawp took less time to answer and said, "I'm good Hermy. Can Grawp pick you and Harry up?"

Hermione flinched before she turned to Harry who gave her a small smile and answered for her, "We can, but only for a minute Grawp. We both have a class we need to get to soon." Grawp nodded and gently grasped both Harry and Hermione and sat them on his shoulders. They could see over several trees on the forest and actually caught a glimpse of the castle before Grawp set them back down.

They waved good bye and Grawp cheerfully screamed, "Grawpy like Harry and Hermy."

Harry and Hermione smiled at Grawp before Hagrid led them back out of the forest. They reached his hut and he simply said, "Thanks 'Arry, 'Ermione. I knew Grawpy would you like as much as I do." Harry and Hermione nodded with smiles still on their faces before they quickly made their way back to the castle and the greenhouse for Herbology with the Hufflepuffs.

Herbology was a rather quiet affair as they worked on the murtlap they had in the greenhouse as Harry thought back to that first night after classes and his detention with Umbridge. The class served more as a therapeutic experience more than an informative exercise and soon they found themselves in the great hall going over Harry's lesson plan for the night's DA meeting. Hermione looked excitedly at some of the hexes Harry would be introducing because although she could perform them she knew Harry could teach them all a better way of doing them.

They went to the room of requirement early to do some practice dueling between the two of them, and also Harry had promised Hermione that he would teach her the shield conjurations he had learned over the summer.

As they practiced Harry was teaching her the key to conjuring a shield strong enough to block all spells except for the killing curse.

Harry looked at Hermione who at this point was clearly frustrated with her rare failure at something before he said, "Relax a little ok?" Hermione shrugged and he continued, "The key to conjuration of a shield as far as I can tell is to imagine what it feels like when you cast a protego shield."

Hermione closed her eyes as though she was pulling up the memory, then she nodded and Harry continued, "Now imagine how your magic feels when you cast that spell and then envision the shield as being solid."

Hermione nodded and she pulled out her wand and made the wand motion Harry had taught her before a mostly solid shield sprung from her wand. She excitedly looked over at Harry who was wearing a look of pride on his face before she ran over to him and pounced on top of him pulling him in to a wonderfully long snog before Harry realized they only had a half an hour before the meeting. The room quickly shifted to the normal mixture of dueling mats and a lectern before Harry conjured a pair of towels to clean themselves up after training, and snogging.

When the DA members started piling into the room Harry took the time to greet each of them and ask them how classes were going. As

usual, Cho walked in the room and greeter Harry strangely as though she still had some unfinished business with him, but she fought that urge and made her way into the room. Finally Daphne and Blaise made their way into the room looking more tired and haggard than the previous meeting. Blaise quietly asked, "Any luck on our parents yet Harry?"

Harry sighed and ran his hands through his hair before he said, "No, I'm sorry guys. Dumbledore just told me he was working on it." Daphne and Blaise merely nodded as they entered the room with Harry closing the door behind him.

Harry stood up at his lectern surveying the group with Hermione standing at his side as his second in command. He took a deep breath and said, "Hello everyone, today I expect to see some better attempts at the patronus charm and then I will assign group with Hermione and me as wildcards. I'll discuss that more when we actually get to it."

Once again the charmed boggart chest materialized and Harry had the DA members get in line. Harry stood behind the chest and said, "Tonight I expect each of you to be able to at least muster a patronus shield. You have had 4 weeks to practice this charm and we need to move on to other things with this group." The rest of the group snapped to attention and even Ron stopped his chatting with Lavender and took on a look of concentration to do as the general of their little army ordered.

Harry watched with satisfaction as everyone in the group focused on their happy memory and they were all able to cast a patronus shield. He was slightly disappointed to see that no one came close to casting a corporeal patronus and even Cho who had nearly done it the first week could only manage the shield. Harry and Hermione each took one turn to keep their skills up and they watched as the patronus' bounded out of their wands and dispatched with the pseudo-dementor with ease.

When they finished Harry closed the chest and it vanished without a sound. Harry looked around at the DA members sighed and simply said, "Good job on creating the shield everyone. However, I want you

all to continue to work on the spell in your off time so that we can have a couple more members aside from Hermione and me that can cast a corporeal patronus. For now I will have you all split up based upon lists randomly selecting the group members.”

Hermione conjured a list and read it aloud, “Ok everyone. On team 1 there will be Fred Weasley, Susan Bones, Neville Longbottom, Cho Chang, Parvati Patil, and Ernie McMillan. One team 2 there will be Ron Weasley, Luna Lovegood, Dean Thomas, Mathias Stern, Blaise Zabini, and Daphne Greengrass.” Harry caught Ron’s expression at being on the same team as both Slytherins but he wisely kept his thoughts to himself. Hermione continued, “Team 3 will include Seamus Finnegan, Hannah Abbot, Lavender Brown, George Weasley, Padma Patil, and Alicia Spinnet. Harry and I will be working together as wildcards to simulate actual battle conditions. Remember nothing more powerful than stunners and disarming jinxes. The team with the most people standing at the end of a half an hour wins.”

Harry looked around as the room shifted into a lush jungle environment with ample places to hide and ambush people. He smiled and said, “I want team one to start in this corner, team 2 in this corner, and team 3 in this corner. Hermione and I will start in the middle of the room. The lights will go off when I signal and time will begin when the lights come back on.” After Harry finished directing everyone where to go to lights went out in the room.

“When the lights come back on the training exercise begins.” Harry screamed to ensure everyone would hear him.

The light came back on as Harry and Hermione disillusioned themselves and cast silencing charms on each other to ensure they were completely stealth. They held hands so they wouldn’t lose each other and walked around the jungle until they caught sight of some spell fire. They quickly made their way over and found that Neville had managed to stun both Seamus and Dean rather easily. They moved back to the middle of the room and found the three Weasley’s engaged in a curious fire fight of their own. It appeared that Fred and George were ganging up on Ron so a couple of warning stunners fired by Harry and Hermione forced it back into an every team for itself mentality.

They watched as Ron stunned Fred but George got Ron. Then they heard some feminine scream about 20 yards away and found a battle royal that had already felled Blaise, Daphne, Mathias, Lavender, Cho, Hannah, Ernie, and Neville.

They looked around and couldn't find the relative winner of the battle so they snuck around and found the Patil sisters locked up in an exchange of disarming jinxes. Padma would disarm Parvati but was not be able to stun her. Harry and Hermione nodded at each other and fired a pair of stunners over their heads. They looked around confusedly before two more stunners hit their targets all without a shield ever being raised. Harry shook his head and found the final four standing members of the DA dueling in the center of the room with Alicia and George working together trying to get Luna and Susan Bones.

Luna successfully stunned George leaving one member from each time to duel it out. Harry glanced at his watch and saw that 5 minutes remained so he used *sonorus* and said, "5 minutes to go." Susan looked around and in her moment of distraction, Luna stunned her leaving the head girl against the aloof Ravenclaw.

Luna spoke for the first time in the little duel as she airily said, "I already know I will win Alicia. If you give up now I will make it painless."

Alicia looked at the Ravenclaw in wonder before she replied, "I don't think so kiddo." She cast a stunning spell at Luna from close range and marveled as Luna did a cartwheel and kicked her in the stomach and forcing her to drop her wand. Luna then simply stunned the head girl and pocketed her wand as she watched Harry and Hermione appear out of thin air and begin reviving all of the DA members.

Harry laughed as he pulled out a sack and handed out Honeydukes chocolate to the winning team as he said, "Luna was the last one standing so team 2 wins."

As they adjourned the meeting every DA member thanked Harry for continuing with the group and Harry graciously deflected all praise to Hermione for helping him so much. When the last DA member left the room Harry let out a big sigh which Hermione noticed before he said,

"If they perform like that with deatheaters over half of them will be coming back in body bags." Hermione nodded as Harry broke off a piece of his last chocolate bar and chewed it in contemplation.

A/N: So Luna won the challenge duel. Little bit of a surprise there. Next chapter some background on what is going on in the ministry and Voldemort's camp. Keep reading and thanks for the reviews.

Chapter 28

The week following Halloween around Hogwarts was rather quiet until Friday when Harry and Hermione found themselves in the library dealing with their large course load and OWL review.

Harry just finished the potions essay Snape had assigned for next week when he noticed a timid young Hufflepuff girl who looked like she was going to start venting steam out of her ears she was so red. Harry smiled at her discomfort and softly asked, "What can I help you with Ms....?"

The girl flushed even more before she rushed out, "I'm Chelsea Abbott. Hannah is my older sister." Harry nodded as Hermione now joined in as she watched with barely contained laughter.

The girl continued, "I am supposed to tell Mr. Potter that the headmaster requests his presence in his office at his convenience sometime this afternoon." Harry smiled in thanks causing the girl to stumble away taking very deep breaths.

Harry looked at Hermione with a perplexed smile and said, "That was interesting."

Hermione giggled before she replied, "Harry, you about killed that poor girl with embarrassment. It's obvious she has a huge crush on you and you about did her in with your smile at her."

Harry chuckled and replied, "Ok, I'll remember from now on I can't smile at blushing girls, check."

Hermione put her hand on Harry's and said, "No Harry, you just need to tone down your charm a little, especially around little girls with crushes."

Harry arched his eyebrow and replied, "Charm? I guess I really don't know what you are talking about 'Mione."

Hermione smiled and replied, "All the more reason Harry. I tell you what love, next time I see you using your charm without realizing it, I'll

whisper it in your ear ok?" Harry nodded and got a kiss on the tip of his nose in return.

After he finished his other remaining homework assignment for the next week, when he finished a short essay that had been assigned for runes. Harry rolled up the parchment and placed it in his bag with his other assignments before he stood up and stretched his legs and back.

Hermione looked up at Harry before she asked, "Going to see Albus Harry?"

Harry nodded and replied, "Yes I am. Save my spot and when I get back we are going to quiz each other over charms and I expect a kiss for every correct answer."

Hermione smiled and replied, "Only if the same deal goes for me Harry."

Harry chuckled and with an exaggerated sigh replied, "Well, I see I am going to have to keep my lips well rested for this." Hermione blushed and smiled prettily before Harry winked and made his way up to Dumbledore's office.

As Harry made his way to the headmaster's office on the chilly late autumn day he ran into his least favorite person in the castle who had incidentally taken the title from Malfoy in a mere two months. Umbridge noticed that on this rare occasion Harry was all alone when she encountered him and decided to make him squirm.

"Why are you out in the halls Potter? Shouldn't you be in class or sully yourself with your pet mudblood?" Umbridge finished her comment with the same sickly sweet smile she always gave when she said something particularly crude.

Harry was about to eradicate the toad once and for all when the same little voice in his head soothed his rage and told him to ignore her comments because she would get hers before the end. Harry took a deep breath as the red in his face and the magic in his eyes cooled down from a simmer before he said, "No Madam Umbridge, my

presence was requested by the headmaster. Now if you'd excuse me ma'am I must be going."

Umbridge stepped aside a little shocked at Harry's apparent show of respect, and confident she had finally broken the annoying but potentially helpful Gryffindor celebrity she made no more snide remarks and instead waddled her way down the hall the opposite direction as Harry was going.

Harry finally arrived at the gargoyle and unlike his previous attempts it didn't merely slide out of the way so he muttered *jolly ranchers* and the gargoyle slid aside allowing Harry to go up the stairs to the headmaster's office.

He paused before he reached the door to the office which was typically open whenever Harry had visited it in the past. He heard the familiar shouts of Minister Fudge and he waited for a break in the shouting to softly rap on the door to make his presence known.

The door opened without a sound as he saw Fudge whose face was the puce color he became so accustomed to seeing on his Uncle Vernon's face, while Dumbledore reflected the calm serenity Harry had grown to expect from the old wizard.

Fudge practically screamed in Harry's face as he said, "So Dumbledore, I see that you would rather hold court with your golden child," he pointed his finger directly into Harry's face which began to unsettle Harry a little before Fudge continued, "than the minister of magic. So be it you old fool. Your days at Hogwarts are numbered, mark my words."

Fudge stomped over to the fireplace and vanished in a flash of green flame and something incoherent screeched. Harry looked over to Dumbledore who actually had a rather tired look on his face which Harry found he didn't particularly care for.

Harry took a seat after Dumbledore motioned for him to take one and then said, "I was told you wanted to talk to me sir?"

Dumbledore sighed and said, "Yes Harry, but I am afraid I must apologize for the minister's rude behavior. I should have dismissed

him from the office before allowing you to enter and be accosted by him.”

Harry shook his head and said, “It’s fine sir, in fact, he wasn’t the only one who laid into me on my way here so I was already somewhat prepared for it.”

Dumbledore made a knowing look and said, “Yes well, Delores may be a deatheater but I am afraid while she does believe in pureblood supremacy, she may have different designs on the best means of achieving the end goal than her master. I am sure you can use that to your advantage by the end.”

Harry nodded and then said, “Yes sir. But I assume that’s not why you wanted to see me though, was it?”

Dumbledore’s face lit up a little and he chuckled which made Harry feel much better before the old headmaster said, “Yes Harry, actually I am quite interested to know how the students in the DA are progressing, in your opinion.”

Harry nodded and ran his hand through his hair before he said, “Certain members are progressing very nicely like Neville and Luna Lovegood. The majority of the group is progressing at about the pace I expected from them, and there also are a few that don’t seem to be taking this as seriously as they should be. I plan on pushing those members harder than the rest this month and if they don’t pick up the pace I’ll think of replacing them.”

Albus nodded and then asked, “I have heard of murmurs around the school, murmurs that only someone who listens as closely as I do, that you held a form of battle simulation last meeting. What did that involve?”

Harry smiled and replied, “Well I split everyone up into three groups with Hermione and me as wildcards that could fire upon anyone, in essence working with you one moment and against you the next. Hermione and I disillusioned ourselves and used silencing charms to observe and throw the occasional stunner as a warning shot when people weren’t taking it seriously enough. In fact we fired twice and Padma and Parvati Patil trying to make them realize they could use

shield charms in a battle. The third time we stunned them to prove a point. Anyways, Luna won the duel by utilizing some muggle gymnastics and disarmed Alicia before she stunned her. Neville stunned the most people of everyone and only went down because he was stunned in the back. I plan on doing one such duel a month but I will add more obstacles to up the ante and force everyone to take it seriously.”

Albus smiled and replied, “It appears as though you are taking this very seriously Harry. I am very happy you have taken this opportunity and done something with it. If your group is anything like you have indicated I would say you have a very bright future as an educator. Has Ms. Granger told you as much?”

Harry blushed and replied, “Yes sir. If I remember correctly she mentioned something about two Professor Potters at the school.”

Albus did something Harry had never seen before when he barked out several laughs as tears of laughter rolled down his cheeks before he composed himself and spoke to a now tomato red Harry who was looking at his shoes with a sudden interest.

Albus got out of his seat and quickly made his way over to Harry before he put his hand on Harry’s shoulder which caused Harry to look up at his aged headmaster who looked as young as Harry had ever seen him. Dumbledore said, “Harry, there is nothing to be embarrassed about. I was not laughing at you, I was merely laughing at how much more relaxed Ms. Granger is compared to when she first came to Hogwarts. I believe while you have gained much in your relationship with her, she has gained a certain amount of humor she may not have had in the past. Do not underestimate the power of humor Harry, after the laugh I just had I feel younger than I have in years.”

Harry nodded as the color had returned to his face before he replied, “Yes she has been a lot more relaxed this year despite the fact that we do have OWLs.”

Albus returned to his desk with his eyes in full twinkle before he said, “The muggle saying goes behind every great man is a greater woman.

I believe it goes both ways as your relationship indicates.” Harry nodded and stood expecting that to be the end of the conversation.

As he reached the doorway exiting the office Dumbledore said, “By the way Harry, I believe Hogwarts would benefit greatly from having two Professor Potters in the future.” Harry turned and gave a slight smile before he made his way back to the library.

As Harry made his way back to the library he ran into two people he had been looking to get alone for awhile.

Harry caught the pair outside of an empty classroom huddled together discussing something of ill-repute before Harry broke them up when he said, “Oy Fred, George I think we need to put our heads together on something.”

Fred replied, “What can we help you with Harrykins?”

George added, “Yes partner, what is it that we can help you with?”

Harry shook his head and replied, “Not out here.” Harry motioned them into the empty room and cast some privacy charms before he continued, “We need to begin the war against Umbridge like I talked about this summer. We need to start small and make it inconspicuous for awhile so she can’t pin anything on us. When the time is right, we’ll put the toad in her place. I know I am getting close to hexing her once for every time she has called Hermione a mudblood this year. So we definitely need to start getting her back and when I say now I mean now.”

George nodded and asked, “So how do we organize this little war oh great leader?”

Harry chuckled and replied, “Well, Hermione and I will start working on the bigger pranks while we’ll leave the first wave of smaller ones to you. Once we get far enough I think we could definitely use your diabolical minds in putting the finishing touches on end game.” Fred and George mock saluted Harry before he brought down the privacy charm and they parted with Harry making his way back to the library to begin the review session he had been looking forward to since he had thought of it.”

Harry reached the library and as he neared the table he heard a very unwelcome voice, "I can only think of one reason Potter would keep a filthy little mudblood like you around. You must be spreading your legs for him so wide that he can't help but stay around for you."

Harry made his way around the stacks to find not only Malfoy but his dog wonder Pansy Parkinson attempting to look intimidating as Hermione looked rather bored with her company. Harry strode over to the table snapping Malfoy and Pansy's attention to Harry before he said, "Malfoy, Parkinson that will be 5 points a piece from Slytherin for verbally assaulting a Prefect. I will also be lodging a complaint with Professor McGonagall and a request for detention for both of you. Please leave the library now, while you both still can."

Malfoy sneered but wisely didn't push his luck as Pansy protectively wrapped her arms around him and led him out of the library with their proud pureblood noses high in the air.

After the unpleasant business was completed Harry and Hermione enjoyed a very knowledgeable study session that left each of them rather tousled and happy with their respective charms knowledge.

On their way back to the common room Harry and Hermione ran into Luna who appeared to be rather perturbed, even for Luna, as she was muttering some nonsense about boys. Hermione looked concernedly at the girl before she motioned for Harry to go on without her. Harry nodded slowly not exactly comfortable leaving Hermione alone to make it back, but he was bolstered that he could keep an eye on her with the Marauder's map and if she needed any help he would come back for her.

Hermione ushered Luna into an empty room and sat the blonde girl down before she asked, "Luna, what's the problem?"

Luna stopped muttering and replied, "I broke up with Neville because I was tired of only snogging and that's all he ever wanted to do."

Hermione frowned a little and replied, "Neville seems like such a nice guy. Why is it that all you did was snog?"

Luna sighed as her eyes watered up a little before she said, "He never really listens when I talk about the things that interest me. He isn't mean or rude about it but I can tell it really doesn't interest him. I figured it wasn't fair to either of us to keep going if we couldn't really talk about anything."

Hermione nodded with understanding suddenly envisioning a relationship with Ron for some reason which caused her to shudder before she replied, "I'm sorry to hear that Luna. I think it might be for the best that you did it though."

Luna nodded and added, "I think so too Hermione. I just can't imagine anyone else wanting to go out with me, or even fancying me because I know I am what some people consider strange. But, I don't think I should change who I am to make friends or get a boyfriend. That's why I like you and Harry so much. You accept people for who they are and embrace their differences as what makes them unique. I have to admit you didn't used to be so open before you were with Harry, but you are much better about it now. I think you both have gained so much from being together." Hermione nodded with a wistful smile gracing her face.

She smiled at Luna and said, "Luna, I am sure that if don't let it get you down too much you'll find there are more boys who like you then Neville. I know for certain that Mathias Stern was eyeing you up at the last DA meeting. He wasn't being a pig about it but he stole his share of glances at you and I think he is a catch for some lucky girl too."

Luna's eyes were reasonably focused as she made a normal smile for a teenage girl before she cautiously asked, "Do you really think so?"

Hermione smiled as she gave Luna a little hug and said, "I'm sure of it Luna. Just make it known that you are interested in him without being too obvious, and see where it goes from there ok?" Luna nodded somewhat happily as the two girls left the room.

Luna and Hermione parted as Hermione made the remainder of her short trip back to the common room. It was rather late so she wasn't surprise to find it completely empty aside from Harry. Harry had fallen

asleep with Crookshanks curled up on his lap purring up a storm. He had the Marauder's map folded up and clenched in her hand. Hermione found the sight to be so precious she ran up the stairs to her dorm room and grabbed her camera. She came back down and got the picture before she gently shook Harry awake and carefully had tucked her camera away in her bag before he noticed it.

Harry sleepily asked, "Is Luna ok?"

Hermione smiled and gave Harry a peck on the cheek for being so sensitive before she said, "Yes Harry. She had just broken up with Neville because they really didn't have anything in common aside from snogging. I told her that other boys were interested in her and it brightened her spirits quite a bit."

Harry yawned and stretched which caused his feline compatriot to do the same eliciting a giggle from Hermione before Harry groggily said, "You mean like Mathias, don't you love? I swear he must have had a sore neck from glancing over at her at the last DA meeting."

Hermione giggled and said, "I'm glad to see I wasn't the only one that noticed."

Harry nodded before he helped Crookshanks to the floor and got out of his chair. Crookshanks slowly made his way up the stairs to Hermione's bed as Harry gave her a sweet kiss on the lips before he said, "I think it's time for bed sweetheart. I'll see you tomorrow morning love." He gave her a kiss on the top of her head before he went up to his bed looking forward to see what the twins had cooked up for Umbridge.

Hermione sat down in the common room thinking about everything that Luna had said before she got up with a happy smile on her face, happy that she had Harry to wake up to the rest of her life Voldemort be damned.

The next week went by quickly as Harry made plans for the next DA meeting and Hermione plotted the first S.P.E.W. meeting of the year. Harry realized that he was approaching the one year anniversary where he and Hermione had first started as a couple and he wanted to do something special for Hermione. He had already gotten her gift

at the last Hogsmeade weekend as he sneakily got her a rare book that he was sure would interest her. He had also made plans to make her dinner in the room of requirement without the aid of house elves, a gesture he thought she would appreciate a lot.

The twins began the war on Umbridge slowly. The first day they planted several dung bombs throughout her office and led her to vacate it for the day. The second day they slipped a small hair coloring potion into her pumpkin juice which caused her hair to become green for the day. Of course, each time a similar prank was played Harry and the twins were sure to have an alibi thanks to Dumbledore and McGonagall. By the end of the weekend Harry and Hermione were still putting the first big prank together when Harry made it an early night and with a kiss goodnight went up to his room to kip out.

As Harry sat in his bed his thoughts snapped back to the anniversary dinner he had been planning for Hermione and if what he was planning would be as romantic as he thought it would. Harry decided to get another man's perspective on his plans so he grabbed his mirror late Sunday night and called out for Sirius.

Sirius popped up on the mirror with a big smile on his face and he said, "Hey kiddo, its good to see you again. I'm actually staked out with Moony on Prophecy watch."

Harry nodded and said, "Can you put Moony on for a moment so I can say Hi?"

Sirius nodded and Remus popped up on the mirror with an equally big smile to match Sirius before he said, "Hey cub how are things at Hogwarts?"

Harry smiled lightly and replied, "I'd be lying if I didn't say extremely busy. We have our second Quidditch match coming up, classes are going well, the next DA meeting is coming up on Thursday before Astronomy, and Prefect duties are only good because I am alone with Hermione."

Moony chuckled and replied, "Well, you have a nice break coming over Christmas where Padfoot and I are taking some time off to give

you a proper Christmas. Oh by the way Tonks says Hi and that she misses talking to you.”

Harry smiled and replied, “Thanks Moony for everything. Tell Tonks I miss her too and look forward to seeing her over Christmas ok?” Remus nodded before he handed the mirror back to Sirius.

Sirius yawned slightly and then asked, “I’ll be in trouble if I don’t tell you that Emmy sends kisses and expects to see you plenty over the holidays.” Harry smiled and nodded.

Harry replied, “Yes Hermione says that she misses both of you clods too.”

Sirius barked a laugh like only a dog animagus could before he asked, “So what brings you to the mirror tonight?”

Harry shrugged and said, “Well I wanted to see how you are, and I also wanted to ask for your input on something.”

Sirius smiled and replied, “Well things are going well here. It’s been quiet since the little trap you helped set at the Grangers. I think Voldemort is tending to his wounds and planning the next move. As far as *other* things go, Emmy is thinking about moving in at Black Manor more permanent basis. Oh and Remus and Tonks want to practice duel with you and Hermione when you both get back for the holidays.”

Harry smiled and replied, “Well, just tell them to bring their best, because Hermione has been picking up everything I’ve been teaching her quickly.”

Sirius nodded and replied, “I’ll tell them kiddo. By the way David made me promise to tell you that he expected a game of you know what when you come back for Christmas.”

Harry laughed and replied, “My god I feel like I am being pulled in ten different directions.”

Sirius retorted, “It’s a bugger kiddo I’m sure.”

Harry chuckled and said, "Yeah, it stinks having everyone want to spend time with you. I consider it making up for lost time." Sirius frowned and then nodded his assent before his face grew into a mischievous grin.

Sirius' grin was wide when he asked, "So kiddo, what do you need input for?"

Harry smiled weakly and then said, "Well on the twenty-second it is going to be Hermione and my one year anniversary of being together. I've already gotten her present, but I was wondering what your thoughts on the romantic evening I had planned, and whether it is romantic enough."

Sirius nodded and said, "Ok let's hear it kiddo."

Harry nodded and said, "Well I planned on making her dinner in the room of requirement and then doing some dancing in front of a fireplace."

Sirius' eyes danced with laughter before he said, "That sounds like it will be a great idea Harry. Your father was always trying to be Casanova with your mother and he usually failed miserably. Of course Lily appreciated the thought more than anything else. But, from the sounds of things you might be setting your sights on something romantic and doable."

Harry smiled sadly and asked, "Thanks Sirius." Harry then looked down at the ground and asked, "Over Christmas will you maybe tell me about some of the stuff my dad did for mum?"

Sirius nodded sadly and said, "Sure thing kiddo. Moony and I should probably concentrate on our guard duty here but I expect to hear from you again sometime soon ok?" Harry nodded as the mirror faded out and he was left looking at himself once again.

Harry put the mirror in his trunk and sighed wishing the next week went by quickly so he could play the second Quidditch match of the year, and to give Hermione an anniversary to remember.

A/N: Please Review. I hope you are all enjoying the calm before the storm. Thanks for all of the reviews and feel free to make your best guesses as to how the year will continue. Thanks for reading and keep up the reviews. Next chapter we have a Quidditch match and anniversary hijinx.

Chapter 29

The first DA meeting of November fell the Thursday before the second Quidditch match of the season and, more importantly to Harry, the one year anniversary of when he got together with Hermione officially.

As the meeting began Harry looked around the room, and he still found a group of teenagers who were still without the looks in their eyes that would ensure survival. Harry had set out originally with the DA to teach students defense in order to protect themselves in the war, and as they year progressed and Voldemort made his moves he quickly realized that defense alone would not be enough, Harry needed soldiers for the war and he planned on all of them surviving. Surviving in order to tell their children in the future, stories of the war so that the mistakes of the past wouldn't be repeated.

Harry went into extensive detail perfecting the form and technique of the group on *stupefy*, *Impedimenta*, *expelliarmus*, *reducto*, jelly legs jinx, and *protego*.

As Harry trained his young warriors he looked around and found a certain hardened determination in the eyes of many group members. Luna's normally dream expression was gone and replaced with a resolve of steel in the deep blue depths of her eyes. Neville was Harry's lieutenant amongst the remainder of the troops and he knew Neville could be counted on at the end if Harry needed him. Children or relations of former aurors such as Mathias Stern and Susan Bones had the knowing looks of people who had heard the tales of the first war with Voldemort and the sacrifices those of the light made to beat back the dark. Susan's aunt Amelia and Mathias's father Brent were auror partners second only to Moody in terms of deatheater captures during the first war with Voldemort.

Harry then looked around the room at the Gryffindors, and he found strength and resolve behind the goofy exteriors of Fred and George that he had never noticed before. With a small smile to himself he thought, *they very well may be the brains behind our army by the end*. He looked at Ron who still hadn't fully been able to separate the fairy

tales his mother had told him when he was growing up, from the painful and dark reality before him. The Patil sisters remained an enigma to Harry along with the rest of the members because he knew that he was only scratching the surface of their potential, and yet to move beyond their potential, they would all have to commit to the training. Harry only hoped that they would become the soldiers they needed to be, in order to survive.

At the end of meeting Harry brought out the pseudo dementor, and he watched as each member of the DA had made progress on their patronus, and even Neville, Luna, and Cho had made partial corporeals which gave Harry hope that in time, every member could create one for use against the dementors.

As everyone dismissed he asked Padma and Parvati to stay behind. Harry looked at the pair of pretty girls and simply said in as kind of a voice as he could muster, "Girls, in the duel our last meeting Hermione and I gave you two chances to raise your shields, and the third time we stunned you. In a battle against deatheaters you won't be given any chances, and it will either be a killing curse or much worse flying your way. I'm not trying to scare you, but in the last war the deatheaters let as many witches live with the shame of being raped, as they did kill without the taint of it. I hope you both understand how much it pains me to tell you this, especially when I am haunted with the possibility that Hermione could just as easily be one of those women by the end of this." Tears started rolling down Harry's face as he continued in a choked whisper, "Please take my words to heart and work harder in the group; it *will* save your lives if you dedicate yourselves." Harry finished as he was clearly pleading with the two girls as tears had continued to roll down his cheeks freely.

Padma and Parvati looked at each other before they nodded and gave Harry a big hug with their promises to work harder and to be prepared for the next meeting, which also so happened to be the second battle duel.

The next DA meeting was to be the most trying of them yet as Harry planned on bringing multiple charmed boggarts into the mix simulating the dark creatures Voldemort would have at his disposal.

Harry had found a charm in the restricted section allowing him to create an authentic battle simulation without the worries of injury. The closest parallel he could think of was the muggle game of paintball.

Harry's experience with paintball consisted of when Dudley and his friends had commandeered the park on a few occasions during the summer before his third year to have paintball wars, and Harry had the unfortunate duty of proving to be moving target practice for the baby whale and his gang. In the end it did nothing but enhance Harry's reflexes and agility, which might have been one of the few positive things to come about from Harry's time with the Dursleys.

Harry awoke the morning of his first anniversary with Hermione at 5 am and it also happened to be the morning of the second Quidditch match of the year. He awoke and went to the room to do some light running and weight lifting. After he was showered, he returned to find Hermione in her favorite chair reading while in a tank top and pajama pants. Harry scooped her up and said, "So, what are you reading this morning love?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "I'm re-reading that book on the mind magics just in case I missed something the first time I read it. Professor Snape told me on Thursday that I would probably have Occlumency mastered by Christmas, and then we could work on Legilimency after the break."

Harry nodded before he kissed Hermione's neck which caused her to shiver a little. He then said, "I was also thinking maybe we could volunteer our services in brewing Remus' wolfsbane potion. I figure if we can make the potion we can help Remus and Professor Snape by picking up some of the slack."

Hermione kissed Harry on the lips excitedly the book forgotten for the moment and excitedly said, "Oh Harry, that's a brilliant idea. We might even be able to brew it over the summer for Remus, if we manage to get it right the rest of the school year. We can ask Professor Snape Monday evening in remedial, but I'm sure he'll let us help him do it."

Harry nodded and nuzzled Hermione's neck for a few minutes before he joined her in the reading of the book he had purchased during his

fourth year. By 9 am Hermione left to get a shower in the prefect's bathroom so she could get ready to watch Harry in his second Quidditch match of the year against Hufflepuff. Once again Harry was reminded of Cedric and after a few emotional minutes sitting alone in the corner of the common room Harry found the strength to pull himself out of the funk and begin to mentally prepare for Quidditch. Even as far away as the Prefects bathroom, Hermione could somehow feel Harry's distress and she quickly finished cleaning up, before she hurried back to the common room to find out what was wrong with Harry.

By the time Hermione returned she found Harry doing some breathing exercises before she gently shook him and asked, "Harry love, I could feel you were sad about something. Are you ok now?"

Harry frowned and looked down at the ground before he said, "I was just remembering the times in the past when I played Hufflepuff. This would have been *his* seventh year and our last chance to play together Hermione. As it is now our last game together involved the dementors and me almost dying. I just wish we could have had one last game is all." He threw his hands up in sad frustration before he said, "Damn it all to hell love, Cedric was always there, and now he'll never be able to things like play Quidditch again, and I still feel like I'm at fault for it all."

Hermione sighed sadly and wrapped Harry into a hug before she whispered in her ear, "Harry, Cedric is gone honey, and I know for certain he wouldn't want you blaming yourself for this. He would want you to enjoy flying and grabbing the snitch. You have so little that hasn't been touched by V-Voldemort in some way; don't let him ruin this for you. If you do then he has already won, and we both know that we can't allow that ok?"

Harry nodded into her shoulder before she pulled away and gave him a gentle kiss on his forehead. She smiled slightly and said, "Good Harry. Now get your arse ready because I plan on snogging the conquering hero's brains out today, so don't make me kiss the Hufflepuff seeker."

Harry laughed which was salve for both of their rapidly becoming tortured souls, before he said, "You know how much I hate to disappoint you, and how much I love to snog you. He won't stand a chance love, I promise you." Harry mock saluted before he stood up to Hermione's giggles and they made their way to the great hall for the ceremonial tea and nibble of toast before one of Harry's matches.

They reached the great hall to find Ron and Lavender fidgeting at the table and looking rather green while they attempted to read the prophet and have breakfast. Harry knew Ron was nervous if his mouth wasn't stuffed with food so he asked, "Ron, you ok mate?"

Ron looked at him with wide eyes and stuttered out, "S-sure thing Harry. Just ready to beat some Hufflepuffs around the pitch mate."

Harry shook his head and said, "Ron, you did fine the first match and I really don't feel like pulling your head out of your arse every match. So get a grip, *it is just a game*. After the match you can still snog Lavender and beat some helpless second year at chess. Life will go on whether we win or lose."

Harry sat down as Hermione sat next to him and they shared a plate with a couple of pieces of toast on it. They sat and nibbled on the toast as they shared the prophet and drank some tea. By the time breakfast was over it was time to go down to the pitch. Once they got outside of the castle Harry summoned his firebolt like he had back in fourth year during the first task as he walked hand in hand with Hermione.

It was a brisk but not freezing late autumn morning as the pitch still held the remnants of the previous night's frost but now it only appeared to be dew. The air was cool but clean and it was refreshing in small doses. Harry gave Hermione a kiss on the lips before he headed over to the Gryffindor locker room and he said, "I plan on collecting on that snog so cheer me on love." Hermione smiled and gave him one last kiss on the lips for luck before heading over to the stands to take her usual spot next to Hagrid.

After a very forgettable pep talk from Katie as Harry concentrated on how he would catch the snitch, the Gryffindor team walked out of the locker room and mounted their brooms and flew high into the sky of

the sunny but chilly Scottish morning air. Harry flew towards the Gryffindor stands and waved to Hermione before he flew back over the center of the pitch.

The boisterous voice of Lee Jordan interrupted the general chatter of the stands as he his magically amplified voice called out, "Today's Quidditch match pits the Gryffindor Lions led by captain Katie Bell, against the Hufflepuff Bears led by captain Ernie McMillan. Gryffindor is 1-0 with a victory over Ravenclaw in their first match of the season while Hufflepuff is 0-1 and in desperate need of a win after losing badly to Slytherin their first match of the season."

Madam Hooch took the flip and Hufflepuff won electing to place Ron at the south goal nearest to the Hufflepuff stands hoping to rattle the inexperienced and coincidentally easily rattled keeper for the Gryffindor team. Katie immediately went into captain mode as she screamed for everyone but Ron to hear, "Chasers you know what you have to do. Control the quaffle, and beaters you give Harry a gap and we'll take care of everything else."

The teams assembled in the sky as Ernie who led the completely inexperienced team, as captain and seeker, even if he was only a reserve on the team the third year as he apprenticed under Cedric. Harry and Ernie shared a nod as Ernie was saddled on his Nimbus 2000. The balls were released and Harry darted away in search of the snitch.

Lower down in the skies McLaggen, Katie, and Angelina were doing just as Katie expected controlling the quaffle with ease against the inexperienced trio of Hufflepuff chasers. Within five minutes it was 50-0 Gryffindor and Ron had yet to even face a shot. Harry could see Ron being taunted about being the red tailed Weasel by the Hufflepuff faithful, even though Harry knew it was rather lame it was at least some sort of preparation for the Slytherin match that fell in February to determine for all intents and purposes the Quidditch cup.

Harry finally caught sight of the object of his short term desires before he glanced back and caught the object of his lifelong desires cheering him on. With a burst of speed he closed in on the snitch as Ernie was still aimlessly flying on the other end of the pitch looking at a

chocolate wrapper shining on the ground or something else shiny that had distracted him.

Harry darted down towards the snitch and as he prepared to grasp the snitch he heard a scream and closed his hand around the snitch. A second later he was hit in the ribs by a bludger hit by one of the Hufflepuff beaters and began to spiral quickly towards the ground as he blacked out momentarily from the pain in his sides. When the fog of pain cleared he realized he was only feet from the ground and he was barely able to make a rough landing, preventing further injury but resulting in him sprawled spread eagle on the pitch face down in the grass.

Hermione watched the exchange with delight as Harry caught the snitch and then with horror as he was hit by a late bludger and spin aimlessly towards the pitch a hundred feet below. She was out of her spot in a blink and was heading down the stairs of the stands all the while keeping her eye on Harry's fall. She breathed a little easier as he appeared to flatten out some, before he landed roughly on the ground and ended up sprawled out on the pitch. By the time she had reached the ground she opened up into a full sprint as she was joined by Dumbledore, Madam Pomfrey, and Umbridge in full waddle towards Harry's fall form.

As they approached Harry rolled over with what appeared to be a great amount of effort and Hermione once again locked eyes with Harry mentally conveying everything that needed to be said such as, "I'm ok, just some broken ribs." And then Hermione in retort, "You're still getting that snog Harry." This of course was followed by a painful smile, before Madam Pomfrey had conjured a stretcher and began floating Harry back to the hospital wing. If they had taken time to look they would have seen Ron being led off towards the castle thanks to his shutout although he only faced two weak shots from the Hufflepuff chasers, not that the witch and wizard heading to the hospital cared all that much.

By the time Madam Pomfrey had mended Harry's ribs it was nearing dinner time and Harry's grand plan. While in the hospital wing he was visited by the entirety of Gryffindor house led by Ron, who congratulated him on his catch and wished him a speedy recovery.

After they left, Harry asked Hermione, "Love, they are treating Ron like he won the game single-handedly. Do you have a clue why that may be?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "I might have suggested to the other fifth year girls to treat Ron like the hero of the match while I got the real hero to myself."

Harry chuckled lightly as his ribs were still a little sore before he said, "So, do you plan on fulfilling your promise now or later?"

Hermione made a sly smile before she leaned over to Harry and whispered throatily, "Both."

After a very good fulfillment of the first part of her promise, Madam Pomfrey had to break them apart using everything short of a hose. Harry was released from the hospital wing soon after and as soon as they exited Harry pulled Hermione into a little alcove, and gave her a deep kiss before they broke apart panting slightly and he said, "Happy anniversary love."

Hermione smiled brightly as she glowed before she excitedly whispered, "Oh Harry, I can't believe you actually remembered, what with your match today and how busy you've been."

Harry smiled as he took her hand and began walking towards the stairs. As they mounted to stairs Harry said, "I thought we might celebrate properly after we get washed up. Not that you don't look lovely no matter what you wear, but I haven't really had a chance since the match and I figured you might want to dress up a little for the occasion."

Hermione still had the same bright smile on her face of a few moments ago when she asked, "What occasion?"

Harry kissed her cheek before he said, "Why dinner and dancing of course." Hermione shrieked excitedly as she bounced up and down on the stairs and hugged Harry.

Eventually they reached the portrait entrance and after Harry said, "*Veni Vidi Vici*." They entered to find a full blown party going on in the

common room. The room reeked of firewhiskey which after a quick sweep by Harry and Hermione had been removed and harsh words whispered to Fred and George. The drink of choice quickly became butterbeer and the revelry began to die down to an acceptable level. Harry found the sixth year prefects and made it known that the party was not to get anymore out of hand and should be broken up by midnight.

After they both grabbed quick showers, Harry put on his second nicest set of dress robes over his polo shirt and slacks, and he fixed his hair and badge before he holstered his wands and made his way down to the common room where the party continued unimpeded. Hermione pulled her hair back into a ponytail and put on a black dress she had gotten shopping with her mother right after school had ended for summer break.

Hermione followed a moment later and after they had managed to push their way through the advances of almost every intoxicated Gryffindor boy and girl, including Ron and Lavender. After fighting their way through the randy throng of Gryffindors they reached the relative safety of the halls finally on their way to the room of requirement. They entered the room both were the picture of class, with Harry in a nice set of black dress robes with green trim and the Potter family crest over his heart, and as Hermione wore a lovely black dress that was form fitting but in every way comfortable and practical. Harry led Hermione into the room to find a kitchen and couch already set up with the fireplace in its full glory with a book already perched on the couch for Hermione to read.

Harry smiled softly and said, "I will be making dinner tonight so I assume Fettuccini Alfredo with some grilled chicken on the side meets your approval. Hermione nodded excitedly at the mention of her favorite meal, before Harry led her to the couch and added, "Relax a little love and while I'm cooking read your present. I'll only be thirty minutes or so ok?" Hermione smiled and gave Harry a kiss on the lips before she took her place on the couch as a foot rest magically appeared for the ever inquisitive young witch.

Hermione grabbed the wrapped book from the spot next to her and read the card first. It read:

Hermione,

I found this book on our last Hogsmeade trip buried under a pile of defense texts. As far as magic can take us, our love will find us together in the end no matter what. The book inside of the wrapping paper doesn't adequately describe how I feel about you, but I hope and believe that you read it carefully and take some of its considerations into account. I'll love you forever, even after I die old and gray, and I hope we can start our next great adventure together.

Happy Anniversary Baby

Love,

Harry

As Hermione unwrapped the present she found a first edition of a very rare book she had only heard of in passing once before. It was titled, "The Magic of the Soul: Loves Many Connections and the Existence of Soul Mate Magic. The book had no author, and in Hermione's varied experience with books, she often found many books with such a claim. Although they were typically books of magic long ago forgotten or of information passed down through the generations of magical brethren, that time had otherwise left to die. After she read the respective tone and rhetoric of the books, she determined the book was in excess of 1000 years old and dated back to the times of founders of the school she currently resided.

By the time she had finished the introductory chapter that tried to capture the essence of various magical phenomena directly tied to a witch or wizard's love, specifically for their fellow man or woman, she caught a scent that made her mouth water with anticipation. She glanced over and watched Harry effortlessly handle the kitchen as he appeared to be making some confectionary treat for dessert and as he also watched the main course carefully on the muggle stove the room provided.

By the time she finished the second chapter of the very thick book, Hermione found a hand appear over the last page she had read. She looked up as Harry had changed back into his dress robes after he had briefly changed out of it to do the cooking. Hermione marked her

page, and then she took Harry's offered hand as he led her over to the small, but elegant looking, mahogany dinner table that the room had constructed simply from Harry's need.

Harry helped Hermione to her seat before he said, "Are you enjoying your book so far?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Yes Harry it is a lovely gift. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if it was written by the founders themselves."

Harry made a knowing smile having already come to the same conclusion when he found it at the bookstore, before he replied, "Either would I love. I hope the main course is to your liking." Harry waved his hand as two plates with steam flowing off of them slowly flew towards them from the kitchen.

Hermione's plate landed perfectly at her place as did Harry's before they enjoyed the rest of the meal in silence aside from the soft sounds of classical music the room provided in the background. After they had each finished the delicious meal Harry had made, he banished the plates and silverware before he stood up and took Hermione over by the fireplace as the music from earlier shifted, to the same songs they had danced together to at the Yule Ball almost a year ago.

Words were left unspoken as they just swayed and moved to the music depending on their mood. They held each other close and looked into each other's eyes as they kissed passionately before eventually breaking apart and resting their heads together. This continued all the while their bodies reacted to the magic, as though they were magically compelled to do so.

After they had danced for what seemed to be an eternity, and yet not nearly long enough, they broke apart and with a quick glance at his watch Harry realized it was nearly one in the morning. He gave a soft smile to Hermione as he took her hand, and gave her one last kiss before he said, "To the first of many days like this my love."

Hermione smiled and gave Harry a kiss before she said so quietly not even Harry could hear, "For eternity Harry."

A/N: Please review. The war against Umbridge takes a jump forward next chapter as the ministry begins to mess in places it shouldn't. The second DA battle duel takes place and this time Harry and Hermione join in on the fun. Thanks for all of the great reviews and keep reading and reviewing.

Chapter 30

The remainder of the weekend for Harry was spent relaxing around the common room and working on OWL review with Hermione. Harry had a very strange feeling before he went to bed so he made sure to reinforce his occlumens shields before he settled into a deep sleep.

Harry's dreams were typically of the brown haired variety, this night however, Harry found himself in a spot which appeared to be on the water.

The dark wizard that was destined to be either Harry's greatest victory or most crushing defeat was in a large cave and he was very irritated about something.

Voldemort took out his frustration on some strange looking creatures that resembled the zombies from bad muggle horror movies. Harry watched in fascination as Voldemort screamed, "How dare Regulus betray me from the grave. The value of my Horcruxes is too high to be playing this foolish game. Now I must fortify the rest and retrieve the diary from Lucius. Time is of the essence to ensure my victory."

Voldemort then looked around as though he sensed something, and he sneered before he said, "Potter, I almost didn't sense you in here. Tell me, why is your essence so faint? Have you become so weak that you no longer want to play with me? Speak to me Potter." Voldemort finished as he began to grow frustrated with yet another thing, namely Harry's dreaming.

Voldemort thought for a moment before he made a malicious smile and said to no one in particular but it was aimed at Harry, "Potter, I suggest you keep an eye on the dogs the muggle loving fool has guarding the prophecy, you never know when they might have to be put down." With this Harry awoke with a scream. Fortunately Harry had made it a point to cast silencing charms on himself before he went to bed so he wouldn't wake anyone else up. His nightmares had all but become non-existent since he had removed Voldemort's soul piece, but he still did it out of precaution and consideration of his roommates.

When Harry's eyes opened he immediately tasted iron and with a quick wipe of his hand he realized that he was suffering from a rather nasty bloody nose. Harry rolled out of bed and felt a little light headed before he cast a quick cleaning charm on his bed and stumbled over to the bathroom to clean himself up.

Harry reached the bathroom still feeling quite lightheaded. Harry reached the sink and as he began to wash the blood off of his face his world began to spin. Harry grasped the sink tightly before his left arm suddenly stopped working and his knees buckled. Right as Harry blacked out his other arm gave out and he fell to the floor ungracefully face first as his nose began to bleed once again upon impact.

Monday morning Hermione waited for Harry patiently until she began to grow concerned with Harry's absence. He had grown into a fairly time tested routine where he would return from his morning workout and greet Hermione with a kiss. After fifteen minutes she began to grow concerned even though no one else was up yet. Hermione determined she should grab the Marauder's map from Harry's trunk so she went up the stairs to the boy's dorm. When she reached Harry's bed she noticed it hadn't been made, only increasing the level of her concern.

Hermione grabbed the map and when she activated it she found that Harry was in the fifth year boy's bathroom. She walked over to the room and saw the door cracked open. Throwing all possible improprieties to the wayside Hermione entered the room and dropped to her knees when she found Harry crumpled up into a bloody heap on the floor involuntarily curled up into the fetal position.

Hermione immediately got up off her knees and rolled Harry over and with relief to find him breathing albeit weakly. Pulling the same trump card she had earlier in the year she called out, "Dobby!"

The little elf popped into the bathroom and his eyes grew large before he asked, "W-what can Dobby do for Harry Potter's 'Mione?"

Hermione took a deep steadying breath and said, "Dobby I need you to get the headmaster and tell him to bring Madam Pomfrey and some blood replenishing potions immediately." With a soft pop Dobby

was gone as Hermione cradled Harry's head as she whispered nonsense into his ear more for herself than Harry.

No more than five minutes later Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey ran into the bathroom and Dumbledore asked the obviously distraught Hermione, "Ms. Granger how did this happen?"

Hermione looked up with tears in her eyes and blood on her cheek from cradling Harry before she answered, "I don't know sir. He didn't meet me when he normally does in the morning so I came up to check on him and his bed hadn't been made yet which was unusual. I noticed the bathroom door cracked open and found him face down in a pool of his own blood. I'm pretty sure he had a bad bloody nose and passed out because I couldn't find anywhere else he was bleeding from."

Madam Pomfrey nodded and conjured a stretcher while Dumbledore hooked up a magical I.V. and they began to administer the blood replenishing potions.

When Harry awoke Monday night he found several people surrounding his bed. Hermione was actually sitting on the edge of the bed holding his hand, Remus and Sirius had their arms around their significant others and they all had looks of concern on their faces. Finally, Dumbledore and Fawkes were at the foot of his bed as the old wizard peered over his spectacles at Harry before he asked, "Harry, if I may be so bold as to ask if you know why you are here tonight?"

Harry sighed and weakly said, "It wasn't a vision I don't think. But it was a dream and somehow I came across Tom in a cave by the sea with some weird zombie things. He was angry and that's why I think I saw him in the dream. The only time I seem to see him anymore is when he is really angry or murderous like the night of the attack on Hermione's home." Harry took a deep breath and Hermione gave him a sip of water before he continued, "He didn't even know I was there for a while but he was really irritated about something called Horcruxes." Harry mentioned this with an inner smile that he shared with Hermione before he continued, "He mentioned the diary I destroyed in the chamber of secrets sir and then he realized I was

there. He kept speaking to me and he mentioned that I was weaker than normal before I woke up and my nose was bleeding badly. I cleaned up my bed and I guess I passed out in the bathroom.”

After Harry finished speaking there was a long moment of silence before Dumbledore spoke, “Harry, I have theories as to what Voldemort spoke of in your dream. I will speak to you in length about them over the holidays if that is ok. I need to do some research before I go any further but if founded will confirm many of my suspicions. You will be free to leave the hospital tonight and Ms. Granger has been kind enough to hand in any assignments you may have had due today and take notes for you as well. I hope this is the last time you find your way to the hospital wing for the year. Poppy enjoys the company but would prefer to see other students than yourself.” Dumbledore finished with a laugh in his eyes as Remus and Sirius chuckled quietly before getting swatted upside the head by Tonks and Emmy. Dumbledore quietly added, “You can also mention to Mr. Zabini and Ms. Greengrass at the next meeting of the DA, that their families have been safely moved, and if they request it I can have them moved to private quarters near Severus’ room.” Harry smiled and nodded before Hermione gave him a kiss on the cheek, and not much later Harry was released from the hospital wing for the second time in less than a week.

On the walk back to the common room Harry quietly asked Hermione, “So, how many Horcruxes do you think Voldemort has love?”

Hermione squeezed Harry’s hand and replied, “I have no idea Harry. I think we should start working with Dumbledore on this though. The only thing we shouldn’t mention is that your scar horcrux has been removed and transferred. I will alter my unbreakable box over Christmas break so that you and the headmaster can open it also.”

Harry nodded and quietly added, “Do you ever feel like, I don’t know, like this is all going too fast somehow?”

Hermione sighed and put her head on Harry’s shoulder before she said, “I don’t know Harry. But, I do know I’ll be here for all of it. No one, not even Voldemort, can take me from you now. In fact, I have to talk to you about that when we go home for Christmas.” Harry nodded

and she continued in full Hermione mode, "Was there anything else from the vision that you forgot to mention earlier?"

Harry thought for a moment and then his eyes lit up as though discovering an important piece of the puzzle, "Tom said something about Regulus betraying him from beyond the grave. Maybe this Regulus destroyed a horcrux already? By deduction from his actions, Tom appears to have a limited number of these Horcruxes. Now we just have to find how many."

Hermione had a look of pride on her face as they approached the fat lady's portrait. She put her hands on the sides of Harry's face and pulled him down into a kiss before she whispered, "Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

Harry smiled and replied, "I'm sure you have Hermione, but I still like to hear it." Hermione pecked Harry on the cheek as she tightened her grip around his waist as he said, "*veni vidi vici*".

After they entered the room they were quietly greeted back by the rest of Gryffindor house eager to find out the story behind Harry's most recent visit to the hospital wing. Hermione shooed them all away as she had Harry copy all of the notes he missed for the day before she ordered him to get some rest and in no uncertain terms, to pick her up for breakfast at the regular time. Harry chuckled and then did as she commanded as he tucked himself in hopeful to get some sleep without the presence of Voldemort.

By Thursday evening the second Battle duel of the DA was scheduled. Over the course of the week the twins had given Umbridge a beard to match her moustache, gave her warts to match her personality, and caused her to sprout several less than savory appendages between Monday and Thursday. Harry and Hermione continued to work on the first of a series of large pranks that was to begin the day before Christmas break. Hermione had titled the pranks "Toadicide" and by the end Umbridge would beg for mercy.

Harry stood just inside the room of requirement and greeted the members as they entered he carefully watched the expression of each member who entered. Harry watched as Neville entered and gave Harry a tight smile and a determined nod which Harry returned.

Luna's dreamy expression left little doubt to Harry after he saw the steel in her eyes; he knew she had business to attend to for the night. All of the members were much more concentrated in the task at hand for the night, a fact that pleased Harry greatly before he caught Daphne and Blaise before they could enter and said, "Dumbledore came through, and he has also arranged for new quarters for the both of you next to Professor Snape's."

Harry watched as a spark that had been missing since their first meeting on the express at the beginning of the year returned to the pair's eyes. Blaise and Daphne smiled at each other and released a deep breath they had been holding for what seemed an eternity before Blaise summed everything up when he said, "Thank you Harry. We'll both be moving to our new quarters tonight, after we talk to Professor Snape." Harry nodded as the last of the DA members entered the room before the door shut and Harry smiled as he made his way to the lectern that he had grown so comfortable standing behind since the group had started.

For some reason the room seemed larger than normal for the meeting this evening as Harry stood and made his presence known, a presence which would soon match the presence Dumbledore had when he entered a room. Harry's eyes twinkled before he said, "Tonight I have a special treat in store for you. We will be doing another battle duel tonight but instead of three teams of six people we are going to have ten pairs. Hermione and I will be joining the fun in full tonight, and lethal spells will be allowed. I have already placed safety guards on the room tonight so that no harm will come from being hit by a lethal spell than that you will be paralyzed until the duel is finished. I want you all to pair off voluntarily because I believe you will work together better with someone you know well. Anyone not pairing off will be paired off by me. Once you are finished pairing off I will describe the various obstacles I have prepared for everyone so that I will not have an advantage."

Harry watched with amusement as Luna paired off with Mathias, easily making them the second most dangerous pair in the group. Ron and Lavender paired together as Harry mentally checked off which pairing would go down first. Parvati and Padma along with Fred and George paired together putting both twin pairs together. Neville

paired off with Susan Bones which Harry knew would be right with Mathias and Luna as the most dangerous pairs to keep an eye on for the duel. Blaise and Daphne who Harry noted with a twinkle in his eye looked to be a bit closer then they had in the past, were grouped together before he had even finished talking. Cho paired off with Alicia Spinnet in what Harry deemed to be a potential dark horse pair in the duel, as the remainder paired off by their house loyalties with Hanna and Ernie pairing off while Seamus and Dean paired up.

Harry looked around at the pairs and simply said, "The challenges tonight will involve a least ten boggart dementors, at least one troll, and at least one mantichore. This is simply a battle to see which person is standing last. If both members of your pairing are standing I have a very useful prize at the ready. This time it will be a bit more practical then Honeyduke's chocolate. The room will expand into a simulated battle; it will be taking place on the grounds of the school. You all know the ground rules, and remember the use of an unforgivable will result in your expulsion from the group. Good luck and be resourceful out there."

Harry constructed a large shield as each pair scurried off into the magically created battleground. Harry laughed as both he and Hermione disillusioned themselves before the shield faded and all that remained was the noise of the simulated battle in the background.

Harry and Hermione immediately went to work when they chanced across Ernie and Hannah and with a quick pair of stunners and bounding spells the numbers were down to 18. A little indicator popped up in the sky above pseudo-Hogwarts that showed how Harry and Hermione had dropped the first pair out of the contest.

On the other side of the battlefield Neville and Susan were engaged in a short spell fight with Ron and Lavender. Susan dropped Lavender whose skills in divination apparently didn't extend to either raising a shield or ducking spells. Ron was dispatched in short form a moment later as Neville barrel rolled out of the way of a weak stunner from Ron before Neville's shot hit the mark in the dead space between Ron's ears. The indicator lit up again as Ron and Lavender were eliminated and Neville and Susan were marked down for the "kills".

By Hagrid's shack on the battlefield Mathias and Luna were trading increasingly lethal spells with Dean and Seamus who were using the shack as cover until the telltale cold of several dementors caused Dean and Seamus to freeze up. Mathias and Luna used their shield to hold the dementors off and managed to throw in a pair of stunners to drop Dean and Seamus out of the game and scurrying away from the dementors.

Harry smiled as Seamus and Dean were eliminated from the duel and was even more pleased when his suspicions were confirmed at the pair that had dropped them. Harry mused to himself, "Well, if push comes to shove I know who can work well together."

By the entrance to the castle Fred and George were locked up into a daunting battle with a Manticore. Fred and George would alternate spells so the beast couldn't lock its attention on either of them. Finally, Fred and George had herded the Manticore over to where they could bring their plan into play. They both fired *reductos* at the walls of the castle causing the Manticore to be bombarded by the falling debris and effectively taking a Manticore out of the battle. As soon as they finished with the Manticore they both ducked a pair of red bolts that snapped through the darkness at them. By the time they had fully turned to confront their next challenge, Padma and Parvati Patil eyed the pair and fired a few more stunners at the brothers.

While the battle continued Harry and Hermione happened upon Cho and Alicia frantically fighting off the entire balance of the dementors in the simulation. Harry and Hermione cast their patroni and the dementors shrieked and did something Harry had never seen before as the boggart dementors exploded startling Cho and Alicia enough that Harry and Hermione dispatched with them quickly. The indicator flashed and flashed a moment later when Fred and George along with Parvati joined the growing list of casualties. Four pairs were still alive of the beginning ten and Padma existed by herself after her twin fell in the battle against Fred and George.

Blaise and Daphne were using all of their Slytherin cunning and a bit of luck to avoid the battle until the end in an effort to win the duel. Neville and Luna weren't fooled however and found the pair hiding in the shadows near the front of the castle. Neville stunned Daphne

before she even noticed that they had been found. Blaise threw up a hastily cast *Protego* surviving the first wave of attacks.

Neville cast *reducto* at Blaise's feet as Susan followed up with a stunner that grazed Blaise's leg putting it to sleep momentarily. Unfortunately for Blaise it was a moment he couldn't afford as he used the counter spell to the stunner but was greeted by a pair of red bolts spaced apart far enough he couldn't dodge both and in the end dodged neither as he fell to the ground in an ungraceful heap. The two Slytherins were marked up along with the rest of the fallen and soon were followed by Padma who had dropped to the team of Mathias and Luna which left three pairs to go.

Neville and Susan ran into Luna and Mathias out on the path leading to Hogsmeade. Susan let loose a *reducto* which Mathias surprisingly blocked with a hastily conjured shield which caused Neville to salute him before snapping a stunner that Luna blocked with a *protego* shield. Mathias snapped off a stunner as Luna blocked Neville's and dropped Susan with shot between the eyes. Neville quickly retaliated and hurtled a *reducto* at Mathias and Luna's feet and resulted in a large chunk of the ground knocking Mathias out while Luna dusted her shoulders off as though she only had a little dust on her.

Harry and Hermione finally found the source of the spell fire and arrived just as Mathias was dispatched of. Harry took Neville to task as Luna and Hermione squared off.

Harry and Neville squared off as Harry casually deflected everything Neville threw at him and waited for Neville to wear himself out. Neville was growing frustrated and finally slipped up when he tried a *reducto* at Harry's feet. The blast threw dirt up into the air in a spray and when Neville looked at where the spell had impacted he was amazed to see that Harry was gone. He tried to scan quickly for Harry before he felt the telltale poke of a wand in the back of his head before Harry casually stunned him and shifted his attention over to Hermione and Luna who were locked up in a rather vicious looking battle of their own.

Hermione rolled out of the way of a stunner and it whizzed just over her ear before she returned fire with an *expelliarmus* which had Luna

rolling out of the way. Hermione noticed Harry had won and she waved him off as he shook his head and had a frown on his face. Hermione pleaded and Harry relented even though she knew that she would be making up her stubbornness later for Harry.

Luna took the momentary mental conversation between the couple to cast *petrificus totalus* at Hermione which Hermione barely blocked with a weak *protego*. Hermione grinned at Luna who smiled back before Hermione quietly cast *silencio* on the blonde Ravenclaw. Luna was apparently oblivious to this and attempted to stun Hermione only to look at her wand with bewilderment before Hermione dropped the last challenger with a stunner to the head. The little voice in Harry's head told him that cleverness wouldn't work against death eaters who were trained to kill; so Harry made a mental note to get Hermione a dragonhide vest for any future skirmishes.

The duel ended as Harry and Hermione were the only ones still standing. The room reverted back as the various members of the DA awoke as though they had been in a deep sleep. Harry and Hermione took their places at the front of the room as they watched everyone stagger towards them.

Harry smiled at his group and said, "I have to admit I am impressed with the progress most of you have made." Then his face turned stony and he continued, "However, there are also a few of you that still continue to barely work at the minimum level. You are all aware of whom you are and if it continues you will be replaced by more deserving people. Remember the fact that you are here is a privilege and should be handled accordingly."

Hermione stepped forward and nudged Harry in the ribs before his face lightened and he added, "That said, I believe those numbers are shrinking each week. Since Hermione and I won with a complete pair we keep the gift certificate for fifty galleons to any shop at Diagon Alley. We are only going to have one official meeting in December and our other meeting will be a Christmas party at the Three Broomsticks the last Hogsmeade weekend in December. Bring a present for a gift exchange. The present for the exchange has to be two galleons or less in cost and should be for either sex. Our next official meeting we will be working on our patronus casting and if

anyone casts a corporeal patronus they will be awarded for their accomplishment. Keep an eye on your coins for our last official meeting before the break and keep working hard guys.”

As the DA members shuffled out, Harry held Neville, Susan, Mathias, and Luna behind so he could inform them of some additional training he had planned for them.

Harry looked at the two blonde Ravenclaws and the brunette Gryffindor and Hufflepuff with a small measure of pride before he said, “You four are the best of the best amongst the students in this school. I will be holding 2 additional meetings for you before the holidays. I want each of you to be able to cast a corporeal patronus by the time we go home for the holidays. Be prepared to work because we will inform you of the meeting times in person and I will not accept failure as an option for this.”

With this the four were dismissed as Hermione came up from behind Harry who had a small smile on his face. Hermione asked, “To war, Harry?”

The smile on Harry’s face took a grim look before he gruffly said, “To war, love.”

A/N: Please Review and tell me what you think. This was my first attempt at introducing action more directly into the story. Please tell me how I can improve my use of action if you think it stinks. Of course if you like it, tell me that too. Thanks for reading and keep up the great reviews.

Chapter 31

The first week in December went by quietly as the last regular DA meeting of the year was held. No one was able to produce a corporeal patronus but Harry had high hopes for the first patronus practice on Saturday.

Harry and Hermione greeted the other four DA members as they entered the room early Saturday morning. Harry chuckled as Neville and Susan looked like they hadn't slept at all the previous night and he knew why. On their prefect rounds Harry and Hermione found Neville and Susan ensconced in the throws of a very saucy position. Unable to say anything because they were laughing too hard, they merely shut the door and left the couple to their own devices.

Harry smiled at the pair as they entered and asked, "I expect you both have an abundance of happy memories stored up from last night?"

Neville and Susan flushed before Luna entered on Mathias' arm and said, "Yes, you should both know the best places to snog aren't the broom closets. Normally we just wait until everyone else goes asleep and we snog in the common room."

Harry and Hermione shook their heads and the door shut behind them as a much more cozy arrangement could be found in the common room as a fireplace and two large couches and a chair exactly like Hermione's favorite chair between them along with a chest with a charmed boggart inside of it, was all that could be found in the room.

Everyone took a seat before Harry simply said, "Guys, we are going to take all day today trying to master this charm. You have had two months to practice the charm as much as you could so I expect with my help you will be able to form a corporeal patronus. Obviously, if you master the charm today you won't have to come in next Thursday night for the same reason. I taught Hermione the charm in about 3 months of infrequent training. The key to creating a corporeal patronus is being able to focus your thoughts."

Luna airily asked, "But, just being able to create a corporeal form against one charmed boggart won't be enough if we ever actually encounter dementors will it?"

Harry frowned and replied, "No it won't. In fact, Dumbledore and I are the only wizards or witches I know of that have repelled more than one. Hermione and I experienced something interesting in the battle duel, which will bear looking in to for research purposes. But, at the moment you need to be able to produce a form against one dementor, before you can worry about more."

Neville determinedly said, "Well, let's do this then."

Harry chuckled and helped Hermione out of the chair before he said, "Ok, this is going to be a long and tiring process, so we will go two hours of practice and then an hour off. Your magic will be tested today as well as your mind. Line up and we'll begin." Hermione joined the rest in the line before Harry continued, "I need you to concentrate on the happiest you've ever been. Now, try to narrow that down to the smallest memory you can of that time. When the dementor gets near to you it will affect your thoughts, and make you forget your happy memories. You need to maintain your focus on the memory when casting. Luna you're first, good luck, and remember my instructions."

Luna smiled sincerely; showing most of her teeth, before the chest magically opened and the black billowing presence of the dementor close in on her. Luna strongly cast *Expecto Patronum* and they all watched in a combination of surprise and amazement when a strange creature flowed out of her wand. The creature appeared to be a mix between a Rhinoceros and a Raccoon. The creature viciously clawed the dementor and it returned to its chest.

Harry was clapping appreciatively, before he half jokingly, half seriously asked, "So, am I to assume that's a crumple-horned snorclack?"

Luna smiled as Hermione shook her head in disbelief before Luna airily replied, "Of course it was Harry. Typically they are very docile creatures, but they do generally attack evil creatures."

Harry nodded slowly as his eyebrow threatened to join the rest of his hair and said, "Yes, well that wasn't actually a snorcack, but instead your manifested happy thoughts." Then a somewhat evil smirk crossed his face before he added, "Luna, either you've been practicing a lot in the 2 days since our last meeting, or you've managed to come up with a much happier memory. I wonder if Mathias has something to do with that."

Luna remained unaffected while Mathias had the good graces to blush lightly, before Harry released the boggart for him. Mathias mustered an unformed patronus on his first attempt, which Harry was rather pleased with. Neville and Susan managed very strong shields on their first attempts, and Harry realized he would have to work harder with them in order to have the success he wanted by the end of the day. By the end of the first two hour period, Mathias had managed an almost completely formed patronus, which looked very feline in its shape. Luna confidently said, "Mathias' form is a tiger. It matches his spirit very well."

Hermione had finally had enough of Luna at this point and simply said with a smirk, "Or, is that the nickname you have for him when you snog?"

Luna replied unfazed and conceded as she said, "Well, there is that too, but the only reason I call him a tiger, is because it describes him perfectly." Hermione shook her head mirthfully before they watched Neville go again and make little or no progress before Harry shut the chest to conclude the first two hours session.

He looked around and said, "Ok guys, that was a very good start. Neville, Susan if I could have a moment?"

Mathias and Luna shrugged and took the offered hot chocolate from Hermione as they snuggled on the couch and Hermione looked at Harry longingly, which caused Harry to chuckle and put up his index finger to indicate it wouldn't take long.

Harry took Neville and Susan over to the corner and wrapped his arms around each of their shoulder as though in a huddle before a Quidditch match and said, "Guys, I haven't really seen any progress

for either of you since the last DA meeting, so, I am going to try a slightly different tact with you.”

Susan quietly and nervously asked, “What do you want us to do Harry?”

Harry made a reassuring smile before it faded into a frown and he said, “I want you both to think about everything you will lose in this war, if we lose.”

They both frowned before Harry continued, “I know that you both want to do this, but I think you both need some perspective here, especially in order to focus yourselves enough. I would never challenge your motivations, but I am offering a different perspective. If we lose, Hogwarts will be gone, your friends and family will be dead, and the shadows will cover everything that was once happy and pure. Now, I want you to think about that for the next twenty minutes. After that, if you aren’t sufficiently motivated, well then nothing will work.”

Harry released their shoulders and returned to Hermione and kissed the tip of her nose, before he accepted his mug of hot cocoa and snuggled with Hermione on the couch. Harry cautiously glanced at Susan and Neville once in awhile and was satisfied with the looks of concentration and determination etched into their faces and body language.

Soon the hour or rest passed, and they all flowed back into ready positions feeling well rested and prepared to finish their training. Harry had no intention of shortening the training session, even if they were all casting corporeal patroni on their first attempts of the morning as Luna had. In fact, he planned on adding boggarts to the training before its conclusion to further simulate the effects of dementors.

Mathias went first this time, and on his first effort a tiger bounded out of his wand and slashed the dementor with its claws forcing the monster back into the trunk. Luna excitedly kissed Mathias on the lips hard before pulling away and giving Hermione one of her famous *I told you so* looks right back to her. Luna went next, and her snorcack took care of its business; leaving the pair Harry was truly interested in seeing, take their turns.

Neville gave Harry a short nod to indicate he was ready before Harry released the boggart. Harry had a hard time not congratulating him when a nearly formed patronus of something quite large, emerged from the tip of his wand and attacked the boggart forcing it back into its trunk for the first time of the day for Neville. Susan followed with a similar turn as a smaller form attacked the dementor, and Harry was confident all of them would be able to cast corporeal patroni before the next scheduled break period.

Harry was correct with his belief as Neville produced a grizzly bear from his wand and Susan produced a golden retriever from her wand. By the end of the two hours, everyone had excited but satisfied looks on their faces, and Harry hid a smirk on his own. The reason for the smirk was because he was prepared to kick the intensity of the practice up a notch, after they all enjoyed lunch. As they enjoyed the large lunch that the house elves so graciously brought for them; Harry glanced around and gauged just how far he could push everyone the remainder of the day, and still have friends and a girlfriend.

With a smile tugging at his lips as he finished his lunch, Harry gave Hermione a deep kiss which she returned with more than a touch of passion, before he broke the kiss stood and helped her to her feet. Harry glanced around and said, "I'm very proud that all of you have mastered the patronus charm, or at the very least have become quite adept at it. However, true mastery of the charm involves upping the stakes a little. We will begin practicing the patronus charm with three dementors now. If you all can handle this, then I will go up to five dementors for your final test to determine your mastery of the charm. I will be doing this for each of us the rest of the way, because this practice will serve as invaluable experience for dealing with dementors in the future."

The remainder of the afternoon was spent practicing on the boggart dementors. By the end of the afternoon, an extra depth of friendship had surfaced between the six students. In all honesty, Harry and Hermione hadn't gotten too close to any other students, especially since Ron had his hissy fight the entirety of fourth year. But after the day spent training, and to a lesser extent bonding; Harry and Hermione finally began letting people back into their hearts and confidence.

The week following the patronus practice was rather quiet, until Friday morning as the small pranks performed by the twins had furthered the process of slowly driving Umbridge towards the edge. Harry and Hermione had been the epitome of model students in the Umbridge school of thought so she had no reason to suspect that they had anything to do, with the reasoning behind the series of pranks. However, little did Umbridge know, Harry and Hermione had planned the first major volley of their war against the toad, for Friday morning.

The prank involved a combination of transfiguration and charms (Hermione), enchantment of inanimate objects (Harry), and a flair for something over the top that only the twins could offer.

They all quietly ate breakfast on Harry and Hermione's morning off casually interspersed throughout the length of Gryffindor table with Harry and Hermione consciously sitting in the middle. The twins were sitting closer to Umbridge as they chatted animatedly with Lee Jordan about something surely of ill repute.

They all watched out of the corner of their eyes as Harry wandlessly levitated a large package into the great hall and up to the staff table in front of Umbridge. Hermione had used a combination of her charms and transfiguration skills to alter the bow on the package to activate open being touched.

Dumbledore casually peered down his glasses towards the Gryffindor table careful to not look at any single student for too long but confident he knew what students were involved in the tom-foolery. Umbridge carefully extracted the card and it read:

Madam Umbridge,

Your beliefs in the importance of family have inspired us as students and will continue to inspire us to greatness in the future. Please accept this small offering as homage to family and an early Christmas present from your secret admiration society.

Admiring Students

Umbridge glanced around as a smug smile graced her lips as she greedily ripped the bow off of the box and was oblivious to the chuckles she heard and opened the lid to be surprised as over 100 small stone toads hopped out of the box. She suddenly realized that she had been duped and upon the points and chuckles of the students in the hall glanced down and saw that she was wearing an extremely large pink shirt that said, *Umbridge Family Reunion 95': It's a Family Thing*.

Umbridge tried with all of her might to take the shirt off or at least cover it, only to be repelled repeatedly as Hermione had charmed the bow to transfigure and clothes she wore into the shirt and jeans for a set amount of time. Finally after several minutes of futility, Umbridge left the great hall in a huff, as her assorted family members followed her at a slow hop to match her waddle.

The balance of the day Harry snuck around the school disillusioned as Hermione wore his invisibility cloak as they took numerous pictures with both Harry's wizarding camera and Hermione's muggle camera for later use. By the time their prefect rounds had come around their spells had worn off and they chanced across Umbridge and a couple members of her inquisitorial squad.

Harry and Hermione wore carefully neutral expressions as they walked up to Umbridge and her groupies and Hermione softly said, "Excuse us, have you seen anything unusual down that hallway?"

Umbridge snarled and replied, "Nothing to interest you, you filthy little mudblood."

Hermione made an ingratiating smile as Harry imperceptibly squeezed her hand a bit tighter even though his facial expression didn't change at all. Hermione sweetly said, "Thank you Madam Umbridge, have a nice night."

Harry and Hermione turned around and moved as far from Umbridge and her squad as they could. The remainder of their patrol was spent snogging over the victories of the day, and the victories of the future over the wannabe tyrant of Hogwarts.

The following morning Harry awoke and pocketed the small gift he had wrapped after he had taken his morning run and lifted some weights. Harry had stopped lifting weights as much because he didn't want to be too bulky and Hermione had made her thoughts known that she liked Harry just like he was and, "He didn't need to get all muscle bound."

Harry and Hermione made their way down to the carriages for the last Hogsmeade trip before the holidays. They were joined by Luna, Mathias, Neville, and Susan who represented the DA in force. Harry and Hermione made their way to the book store first before they were supposed to meet at the Three Broomsticks.

Harry had already done the vast majority of his Christmas shopping thanks to the various catalogs from Diagon Alley shops and their anonymous shipping privileges for Gringott's account holders. Harry still wanted to get Hermione some sort of jewelry and he planned on getting small presents for his four favorites from the DA.

Harry slowly made his way around the book store as Hermione had buried her nose in the charms section researching the use of household charms so that she wouldn't need house elves at their home for cleaning in the future. Harry had encouraged Hermione's new passion, and while he searched for the last of his presents, she browsed the section she knew the book was in. Harry decided to pick up *Dirty Fighting Tactics* by: Alastor Moody for Neville after some quick browsing in the defense section. Harry picked up *Advanced Arithmancy Techniques* by: Septima Vector for Luna. He found *The Animal within: Animagus Guide* by: Gilbert Wimple a renowned charms expert. He found an old book for simple shield conjuration for Susan, and he planned on giving out the gifts before the end of classes.

Harry happily paid for Hermione's books on household charms after he simply said, "Well, it will be my house too, won't it?" Hermione responded with a hug and a kiss and she wore a large grin as they walked to the Three Broomsticks with the shrunken bag from the bookstore.

Upon entering the pub they were escorted by Fred and George over to the half of the building that Madam Rosmerta had so graciously donated, to the large group of students for the party.

Hermione was plucked from Harry's arm by Lavender as Harry was pushed over into a large group spearheaded by Mathias and Neville who had a butterbeer at the ready for their leader.

Mathias handed him the butterbeer and cheekily asked, "So Harry, Hermione dragged you into the bookstore didn't she? There's something about smart women isn't there?"

Harry smirked and replied, "Mathias, you only know too well with Luna; that going to the bookstore now pays dividends later." Mathias chuckled and patted Harry on the back in affirmation as Neville launched into discussions of the Professional Quidditch season.

Meanwhile, the girls were discussing their individual plans for the holidays, as they watched Fred and George unveil the matchmaker mistletoe. Supposedly, every witch or wizard not in a relationship would be hounded by the mistletoe, until they kissed someone of the opposite sex under it.

Finally, Lavender asked, "So Hermione, we all see how Harry acts when he is around you. But tell us, how does he snog?"

Hermione smiled mischievously before she answered, "Well, it's not like I have anything to compare it to, not that I ever plan to either. Why don't you girls tell me how your boyfriends snog, and I'll make a comparison to that after you're finished."

Lavender smiled and said, "Ronnie is a little aggressive when we snog but he can be sweet when he wants to. I mean having overactive hands isn't really a crime as long as there in the right places." The girls collectively giggled as Hermione covered her mouth to stop her laugh at the thought of anyone kissing Ron.

Hermione glanced over at Susan who was about as red as she had ever seen her, before she teased, "Come on Susan, tell the rest of us how Neville snogs. You know, Harry and I caught you two last Friday

in the broom closet, but we didn't have the heart to stop you. But I think for that, you should tell us how our timid little Neville snogs."

Susan defiantly looked at the rest of the girls despite her blushing and said, "For starters, Neville isn't timid or little any more. As far as how he snogs, I'd say he was a gentleman and a lover." The girls giggled before Parvati elbowed Luna in the ribs.

Luna dreamily said, "I'm sorry Susan, but I have snogged Neville and while he does snog very well, I'd have to say Mathias is a bit better."

Hermione arched her eyebrow and prodded, "Why is he better Luna?"

Luna smiled brightly and replied, "Well Hermione, you can certainly attest to the positives of having a smart boyfriend. Mathias knows exactly what I like, and still tries new things to keep it all fresh for the both of us. Why, just last night..."

Lavender butted in, "Ok, ok Luna we get the point. Alright Hermione, time to cough it up, how does Harry snog?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Well, I'd have to say while he does a lot of the things you girls describe, he does so much more for me when we snog. You all know how dreamy his eyes are right?" The girls all nodded and she continued, "Well, just imagine sharing a wonderful, sweet, and gentle snog with your boyfriend and then opening your eyes and seeing those bright green eyes looking into your very soul. When Harry snogs me, it's like we share the same soul, I mean I always feel beautiful and wanted, and it never feels rushed or empty. Does that answer your question Lavender?"

Hermione looked around at the rest of the girls and could spot the ones who were happy with their boyfriends, and those that weren't. Luna and Susan shared the same wistful look, obviously thinking more about their own boyfriends than the Harry she had just described. Lavender had a slightly jealous and dreamy look on her face as did the rest of the girls currently without boyfriends. Hermione also noticed the slightly bitter look on Cho's face. Hermione thought with satisfaction, *you had your opportunity to have him Cho, and you played games with him. Now he's mine, and I'm his, and that's how it*

is going to remain for the rest of our lives and longer if that ritual works.

Harry and Hermione eventually fought their way back together at the large table and watched as Cho and Fred were forced to share a kiss under the mistletoe.

Harry whispered into Hermione's ear, "So, do you think Fred might have rigged the mistletoe?"

Hermione giggle and quietly replied, "Knowing Fred, I'd say so yes. I think George might have a harder time if Katie ever found out he was snogging girls behind her back."

Harry arched his eyebrow in question, "You mean, how long have they been together?"

Hermione replied, "Since the end of September."

Harry nodded and replied, "Well, they both hide it well in practice." Hermione shrugged before Harry stood and announced, "Welcome everyone to our Christmas party. We will be enjoying a feast first, and then we will do our gift exchange. Then if the girls are lucky enough, well they'll be asked for their permission to have their feet trampled by some lucky bloke. So tuck in, and enjoy yourselves."

After they enjoyed their food and the company of friends it was time for the gift exchange. Hermione stood and said, "Ok everyone, I need you all to line up and pick a name out of this hat. Whoever you draw you give the gift you bright with you to. Harry and I will take the last two names. If you draw your own name return it to the hat and draw again."

Harry received his gift from Lavender and Hermione received a gift from Daphne. Harry drew Alicia while Hermione drew Cho of all people. Harry received a container of Chocolate frogs while Hermione got a pocket sneakoscope.

Harry decided to open one of his chocolate frogs and had to stifle a laugh when the new card with him on the back describing him as the boy-who-lived and tri-wizard champion. That was of course until he

began to think about whom he was co-champion with. Hermione noticed his expression change from happy to sullen and softly asked, "What is it love?"

Harry merely handed Hermione the card and while she initially smiled she read the card and immediately realized that everything Harry was known for had cost him someone he cared for. His title as the boy-who-lived came at the cost of his parents, and his title as co-champion came at the cost of Cedric.

Hermione grabbed Harry's chin and tilted it towards her so she could look into his sad green eyes. Hermione gently said, "Harry, it's not your fault. It never has been and it never will be. Voldemort is the cause of your pain not you. You've never had a choice in the matter except that you can decide to end his reign where children are forced to grow up without their parents, and parents won't be forced to bury their children. I know it's hard but you have to stop blaming yourself for these things." Harry sighed and gave her a small smile thanking her for being there as she wrapped him into a hug and they held each other for a few minutes.

Finally George started up the WWN and a Christmas ballad started playing in the background. Hermione pulled Harry out of his seat and they swayed to the music along with the other couples. The fireplace gave off enough light so that the shadows from their ministration danced on the wall behind them. Hermione had her head burrowed into Harry's shoulder as they both felt a calm neither had experienced in a long time dancing to a rare muggle song on the network by a muggle that Harry and Hermione both knew as Nat King Cole.

As the song finished everyone looked around and had happy expressions on their faces, happy to be free from the reality of their situation if only for one night, before they heard someone enter the pub very loudly. The person entering the pub happened to Hagrid who thundered into their private part of the bar looking wild and immediately his eyes focused on Harry before he bellowed, "The ministry tried to arrest Dumbledore 'Arry. He disappeared, but not before Umbridge was named headmaster."

Over in the corner a lone voice sounded out, as Ron spoke for all attending as he muttered, "Oh Bloody hell."

A/N: Please Review. Next chapter the tale of Dumbledore and the ministry is told in more detail.

Chapter 32

After Hagrid's revelation the party broke up quickly, and the DA made their way to the carriages that would carry them back to the school. As Harry helped Hermione into the carriage Fawkes appeared with a flash of fire right next to him. Fawkes looked at Harry expectantly before Harry turned to Hermione and softly said, "Well, it looks like Fawkes wants me for something important. I'll be back later tonight ok love?"

Hermione sighed and then kissed Harry on the lips before she said, "Don't be too late because I'll be staying up for you." Harry nodded before he grasped one of Fawkes' tail feathers, and they both vanished in a flash of fire.

Harry arrived in a familiar spot in a flash of fire he was back in the same cave he had met Sirius at with Hermione a year earlier. Harry landed in an ungraceful heap as he could swear he heard Fawkes laugh, the mischievous bird vanished once again, before Harry could do anything about it.

Harry dusted his shoulders off and as he turned around he came face to face with Dumbledore whose eyes were in full twinkle, as though he was in on the joke with Fawkes. He finally became serious and said, "Harry, as you have already been told I have been removed from my position as headmaster."

Harry frowned and replied, "Yes sir, I've heard as much. How am I supposed to survive the rest of the year with Umbridge running things sir?"

Dumbledore frowned and his eyes conveyed an apology that did Harry no good in reality, but more than adequately conveyed Dumbledore's wish that it hadn't happened this way. Dumbledore finally said, "I apologize profusely for putting you in this situation Harry. However that is not why I brought you here. In fact, I brought you here to explain the politics of my situation, and also to tell you that you alone have control over the wards and protections of the castle in my stead. You are the only one with sufficient power and ability to carry it out, and I trust you unconditionally to do so."

Harry sighed feeling the weight of nearly 400 hundred more souls become directly attached to all of the other ones he carried with him. He ran his hands through his hair and softly said, "I will do my best sir."

Albus smiled softly and replied, "I am sure you will and that it will suffice. Now, I must explain to you my tale that had placed me here at this moment so you can be prepared to combat those forces conspiring against us in the ministry."

Harry nodded and the true strength of his resolve surfaced before he said, "I'm ready sir."

Albus chuckled and said, "First, I wish that you call me Albus from now on, especially seeing as how I would only ask for such a favor from a peer and friend, such as yourself."

Harry smiled slightly and Albus continued, "For the last several months, specifically since you had your experience in the graveyard I have been insistent to the minister that he announces Tom's revival to the general populace so that they may be prepared. I am sure you have wished for nothing more than the same also. However, our relative importance prohibits us from placing ourselves in Azkaban to complete a task that is clearly the ministry's in the first place."

Harry nodded and replied, "Yes sir-Albus, Hermione and I had such a discussion earlier this year."

Albus smiled and with a twinkle in his eye said, "You are very fortunate to have Ms. Granger around, I am forced to discuss such matters with Fawkes and once a month he can be rather unreachable."

Harry refrained from making any crude remarks about Hermione in the same manner and replied, "Anyways Albus, I made a promise to the aforementioned lady that owns the key to my heart; that I return as quickly as possible to the castle. Perhaps we could cut to the chase and save our banter for a more appropriate time, when I can enjoy it a bit more which I surely will."

Albus nodded with understanding and continued, "As I stated earlier, I have been insistent to Minister Fudge that he rectifies the mistake he made the night of Tom's revival, which only further inflamed him, eventually culminating in the rather unpleasant meeting you had with him in my office. That meeting set Cornelius onto a very ill-advised and temperamental course of action that will make the next few months very unpleasant for the order and anyone not associated with an old family or pureblood. Perhaps it will help to describe what exactly happened tonight?"

Harry nodded and Albus smiled and started his tale:

I was sitting in my office making the final security plans for the train ride back from Hogsmeade when Cornelius's face came up in the FLOO asking if I would open it so he and a few ministry employees could come to my office to make the final preparations for the security detail.

I wasn't really thinking when I opened the FLOO and before I knew it Cornelius and 5 aurors stepped in through the grate with their wands all pointed at me. At that point I was desperate for some time because I had made a contingency plan in case something like this actually happened.

I spoke to Cornelius and asked, "What is the meaning of this Cornelius?"

Fudge replied, "I would think it's obvious you doddering old fool. I've finally taken action against your breaking of the law and decided to bring up charges of attempting to incite hysteria."

As the aurors brought their wands down to stun me, Fawkes finally arrived and we vanished just as the 5 stunners would have hit me. I summoned my wand and brought up a very strong barrier spell while I completed my final preparations. First, I transferred control of the castle to you Harry because I know without a powerful wizard around to check on the wards occasionally they could be easily bypassed. To be honest Harry, you are probably as powerful as I am if not more than me now. The only reason I'd have any kind of advantage over you is my experience and the wisdom that comes with living for 150

years. You are quickly closing the gaps on them as well. You have made an extraordinary amount of progress in a short amount of time.

I digress, after I transferred control of the castle to you Madam Umbridge and Minerva both made their way into the room, because they had been alerted to the spellfire in my office. Umbridge because she was aware of Cornelius' plan and Minerva because as Deputy Headmistress she has the means on monitoring the castle to ensure no fights get out of hand. The aurors turned their attention to Minerva and they hit her with five stunners as ordered by Cornelius. Obviously a witch of Minerva's age does not take well to so many stunners at once. I had Fawkes immediately take her to Poppy and then I grabbed this book for you on the fine art of wards so that you may be ready to check the ones at Hogwarts upon your return from Christmas break.

I also cast a spell sealing the office from anyone other than you and Ms. Granger to enter. With the spell Cornelius and his aurors along with Umbridge were forcibly removed from my office and unceremoniously placed down by the gargoyle. Fawkes returned and we went to the hospital wing to check on Minerva. Poppy informed me that she would be fine albeit a bit stiff by the end of the break but that she wouldn't be able to teach at all the last week of classes.

After checking in on Minerva my suspicions were confirmed as I heard Cornelius screaming from down the hallway that the new person in charge of the school was Madam Umbridge in her position as High Inquisitor.

"Fawkes and I vanished well before they arrived and I took the small gap in time from when I brought you here and then to decide to tell you that I believe your scar is a horcrux. I have researched for a long time and it all leads to the sad conclusion that you must die in order for Voldemort to die." Dumbledore finished very sadly.

Harry made a conscious decision to tell him that he no longer possessed the horcrux, and replied, "Well sir, that's a shame because Hermione and I already transferred the horcrux to something else. I can already imagine Hermione's reaction that I still have to die in order to kill Tom."

To say Albus Dumbledore's reaction was priceless didn't even begin to describe the old wizard when he let out a loud whoop and wrapped Harry into a big hug before he said, "How did you do it?"

Harry's smile faltered a little before he answered, "I read a book at the Black library. There was a short section on Horcruxes which I felt compelled to read while I was researching curse scars. I am quite sure you had suspicions about the true nature of my scar sir. Why didn't you tell me?" Harry's voice ached for an answer that didn't reek of the tried and true mantra of how they had to protect Harry through ignorance that he heard so often during the summer.

Albus sighed and replied, "How do you tell someone that they have to die in order for the world to live in peace. Especially when that person has already sacrificed far more than they ever should have."

Harry gently put his hand on Dumbledore's shoulder and replied, "I think I've proven that at this point, a little pesky thing like no one knowing how to save me, it wouldn't stop me from surviving this and seeing it past its conclusion."

Albus smiled and replied, "I dare say that you continue to surprise me with your underlying wisdom in the face of adversity. I am proud to call you my friend Harry."

Harry choked up a little before glancing at his watch given to him by Hermione that currently found her hand somewhere on the watch between annoyed and worried. Albus smiled softly interpreting his look and Fawkes arrived before Albus said, "I'm afraid Fawkes doesn't dare another trip onto the grounds of Hogwarts so he will only be able to take you as far as the edge of the apparition wards of the school. I have no doubt that you can *change* into something that will make the rest of your trip more enjoyable. Be sure to take care of Ms. Granger, she will inevitably be a large target for scorn and attack with Madam Umbridge in charge." Harry smiled looking forward to transforming for the first time in quite awhile and also taking care of Hermione as he always did, before he quickly transfigured his bag of stuff including his cloak and the map into a knapsack that would comfortably fit on the back of a coyote.

Once Harry was ready Fawkes beckoned him over and after a quick wave to Dumbledore they vanished once again in a flash of fire. Fawkes Dropped Harry off just as Albus had indicated he would before Harry transformed and licked Fawkes beak, as the phoenix trilled a happy note and vanished once again.

Harry slowly made his way to the castle content to lurk in the shadows until he reached the secret entrance at the base of the school by Gryffindor tower. It was a passageway he had found earlier this year after a Quidditch practice while he was trying to get away from Cho. He transformed back and touched the brick much like Hagrid had the first time he had seen Diagon Alley. The door opened and after he pulled out his map he could see that Hermione was sitting next to the hidden entrance of the secret passageway apparently aware it would be the way he took into the tower.

Harry arrived back in the common room and gently shook Hermione awake as she had been napping in her favorite chair. Harry gently shook her awake and said, "Wake up love; I have a lot of stuff we need to talk about."

Hermione grabbed Harry and forcefully pulled him down on top of her as she snuggled into his chest and let out a contented sigh. Harry chuckled before he gave her a sweet and gentle kiss on the lips which finally woke her up with a bright smile dancing on her lips.

She finally spoke and said, "How did the meeting with Albus go Harry?"

Harry gave her a small smile and said, "Well, he told me the story about how and why he was kicked out of the school. He also told me the truth about my scar. So, I told him we already had removed the horcrux because he was certain that it wasn't possible and that I would have had to die to kill him. That seemed to put him in a bit better mood, because he was feeling rather guilty about placing the two of us right in the crosshairs with Umbridge in the castle and with her in full control of students."

Hermione grasped Harry's hand and asked, "Do you think it will be much worse for me?"

Harry sighed and nodded as he picked Hermione up and sat her in his lap in the chair. He softly said, "Yes I imagine it will be love. We'll have to lay low for awhile and remain content to study for our OWL's instead of participating in class a lot."

Hermione nodded sadly and then said, "So what happened in his office then Harry?"

Harry proceeded to tell Hermione the entire story of Dumbledore's showdown with Fudge and the aurors in his office. She had a shocked expression on her face, which turned enraged when Harry told her how Professor McGonagall was hit with five stunners. Hermione worriedly asked, "Did Professor Dumbledore say how she was?"

Harry sighed and replied, "He told me she would be well enough by the end of break to teach, although he said she might be a bit stiff."

Hermione nodded sadly and said, "She'll probably need to use a cane to get around after begin hit with that many stunners. It would have had to create some permanent muscle damage even if it wasn't too severe."

Harry nodded and then sheepishly said, "Did I mention that I am in charge of the castle defenses until Albus returns?"

Hermione snorted before she gave Harry a kiss on the cheek and said, "No, I can't say that you did love."

Harry added, "Albus gave me a book on wards, that I'm supposed to read by the end of the break so that I can begin checking on them in his office. Apparently there is a central control center for all of the wards of the castle in his office. He cast a spell so only us two can enter the headmaster's office until he returns. So at least Umbridge won't have access to any of the valuable things in his office."

Hermione nodded content that Harry had remembered everything of importance and after they shared a nice long snog in their favorite chair they both went to bed hopeful that the last week of classes would go by quietly and without any problems.

The following day a dread settled in on the school and for the first time in fifty years the castle lacked the calming presence of Albus Dumbledore only to be replaced by a confirmed deatheater.

Umbridge's first actions were rather startling and set the tone for what was sure to be a very long second semester. First, she suspended the positions of prefects and head boy and girl and they were replaced by the hierarchy within her own inquisitorial squad with Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson wielding the same power that the head boy and girl once did.

Remedial with Snape on Thursday started with the typical Occlumency training for Hermione who after repelling both Harry and Snape simultaneously was declared a master in the discipline and she promised to practice her legilimency with Harry over the holidays. They also talked about the new balance of power in the school and how Harry and Hermione would be fine as long as they avoided Umbridge, because Snape guaranteed that he could keep the rest of the inquisitorial squad off their case.

Harry and Hermione did their best to keep out of the spotlight and by the time they were boarding the train Friday afternoon to return to King's Cross the worst of the abuse had been Hermione being repeatedly called a mudblood, but nothing progressed beyond that. Harry had spent the end of the week working on creating a spell for Hermione that would help her deal with the constant ridicule of her parentage.

As they sat in their compartment on the train they were joined by Mathias, Luna, Neville, and Susan as they discussed the less pleasant realities of an Umbridge run Hogwarts. After they chatted for awhile Harry and Hermione snuggled together and began to read the book on warding content with the knowledge that they no longer needed to do a round on the train.

Finally by the time they had gotten within a couple of hours of King's Cross Harry simply said, "Love, I was wondering if you wanted me to cast this spell I designed that will switch the word mudblood to something else of your choosing every time you hear it."

Hermione smiled lightly and stroked Harry's cheek with her hand as she looked at Harry with so much love in her eyes, that Harry thought he might burst. Eventually she answered as she said, "No Harry, while I love that you thought enough of me to make a spell just for my well being, this next semester will be an opportunity to strengthen my resolve and gain control of my temper like you have in the past year."

Harry nodded and then he nuzzled Hermione's neck causing a gasp and a giggle as he planted several kisses along her neck and then moved to her lips that were begging to be properly kissed. By the time Malfoy and his cronies made their way to the compartment, all three couples were engaged in full blown snogs and they surprisingly moved on to harass some other students content with the knowledge that the couples wouldn't be able to cause any trouble for them the rest of the trip.

Once they reached King's Cross the three happy couples did a quick gift exchange as Harry and Hermione handed out their presents and they received wrapped presents from the others as well. After they said their final farewells to everyone including Ron and Lavender who gave both Harry and Hermione rather awkward and uncomfortable hugs while Ron and his love continued snogging.

After they had grabbed their trunks and shrunk them with their second wands they looked around for the order members who were supposed to pick them up.

With a flash of fire Harry was steadily becoming familiar with, Fawkes arrived to find them in the corner that they had holed themselves up in, while they were waiting for the order to pick them up. Fawkes dropped a letter that merely said,

Harry and Hermione,

Due to visibility issues no order members are available to pick you up from the station. As a result Fawkes has so generously offered to give you a "lift" as muggles call it. He can only take one of you at a time so I suggest Hermione come first.

Albus

Hermione shrugged as she grabbed Fawkes tail feather and they vanished in a flash of fire so indistinct that no one remaining at the station recognized it. Harry chanced a look around and couldn't see any of his friends from Hogwarts remaining so he stood on guard waiting for Fawkes to return so that he could go home for the first time in three and a half months. Fawkes returned and Harry latched on his friend and with a flash of fire Harry was returning back to Black Manor for the first true Christmas of his life.

Harry arrived just outside the wards of Black Manor and he allowed Fawkes to perch on his shoulder as he entered the front door only to be grabbed into a fierce hug from Sirius while Remus playfully ruffled his hair. If Harry smiled wider before it had only been in Hermione's presence and it had been a smile meant only for her. This smile was one of a person who was genuinely happy that there were people who cared about him and were excited to see him.

Sirius finally broke his bear hug and said, "Harry, you're growing like a weed. By the end of the year you'll be taller than me. Heck you might be taller than Dumbledore then. Of course if you manage that then you'll really have outgrown your father. James topped out around 1.8 to 1.9 meters and you have to be what, nearly 1.8 meters now Harry; aren't you?"

Harry shrugged and Sirius rolled his eyes before he flicked his wand and a floating number took form over Harry's head and it read 1.78 meters. Remus whistled and said, "Spot on Padfoot."

After Harry moved past the welcoming party he scampered up the stairs to the serenity of his room to unpack for his two week break. As he finished his unpacking he was broken from his unpacking as he heard the soft patter of Hermione's steps enter his room.

Hermione sat down on his large bed and asked, "So, what do you have planned for the break love?"

Harry sat down next to her and gave Hermione a peck on the lips before he said, "I only have to read the book on warding that Dumbledore gave me. Beyond that, I'd say I am flexible. I do want to spend some time with you and your parents while we are here and also I'd like to spend some time with Sirius and Remus too. Maybe

we can go out to the cinema a couple of nights if we have Sirius and Emmy with us or something.”

Hermione smiled and twined her fingers with Harry’s before she said, “I’m sure mum and dad would love that. As it is, dad has already started bugging me to get you, so you two can start one of those silly games he is so fond of.” Harry chuckled and gave Hermione a gently kiss on the top of her head before they heard a commotion downstairs which was followed by some frantic footsteps up the stairs headed towards Harry’s room.

Remus poked his head in the open door and took a deep breath before he said, “Sorry to interrupt guys, but we have an emergency order meeting that was just called and your presence is required as always.”

Harry and Hermione nodded and they slowly made their way out of his room hand in hand, hoping that whatever brought the meeting about wasn’t too horrible.

Harry and Hermione took their typical seats by Remus as the room quickly filled up for the emergency meeting. Albus arrived early for his typical standards and gave Harry and Hermione a smile and nod before he took his seat next to Fawkes’ perch at the end of the conference table in the parlor room.

When the last few members straggled in as Kingsley, Moody, and Tonks appeared rather disheveled but somehow resigned as though they already knew what the meeting pertained to.

Albus stood and began the meeting by saying, “I apologize for calling you all in on such short notice but some very troublesome news has come from the ministry and we need to determine what the proper course of action will be.”

Dedalus Diggle stood up and appeared rather flustered before he said, “This morning Minister Fudge made two directives that have caused quite a bit of division within the ministry. At the moment these moves appear to have begun a movement with the ministry that will eventually lead to Minister Fudge’s removal from office. However,

there is no telling when such a move will take place and therefore the news I come bearing is very disconcerting.”

Albus spoke next and said, “I’ll take it from here Dedalus. The first directive was a veiled effort to take away the order’s ability to offer resistance to Voldemort by abolishing any militia, because they are from here forward, viewed as threats to the ministry’s power base. Therefore, it is of the essence that the order becomes invisible, in our attempts to guard the prophecy. I am sure that Remus and Sirius are both still well aware, as to how they might cast a disillusionment charm. That goes to everyone else that might draw the guard duty, from now until further notice.”

Then after a brief silence Albus peered over his glasses intently and said, “The second directive is even more troublesome, I am afraid. Minister Fudge has passed a law called the Heritage Protection Act or HPA. In short, the law indirectly discriminates all but purebloods and “old families”. Therefore, any muggleborn witches or wizards will be at a severe disadvantage in the times ahead. I have already discussed a solution with an order member, for Hermione that will allow her to bypass the law, that is if she is willing.”

Hermione softly asked, “What will the solution involve sir?” Harry’s hand found Hermione’s and gave it a reassuring squeeze, as David and Elizabeth who had been named de facto agents for the order as muggle intelligence operatives, also watched with concern.

Albus smiled softly and replied, “Ms. Vance has already agreed to adopt you as your wizarding guardian; this action would provide you protection from the HPA as a member of an old family. Officially your name will change to Granger-Vance. If you are interested, then just say yes now or I will never ask again.”

Hermione looked to her parents who gave her reassuring smiles before she smiled slightly towards Emmeline, and said, “I would be honored.”

The remainder of the meeting was spent discussing the HPA in all of its bigoted glory. Provisions for the law included no public disparaging of a pureblood or old family member by anyone other than a fellow pureblood or family member. Another rule much to Harry’s delight

was called the Potter rule and prevented anyone other than a pureblood from making contact either physically or magically to another pureblood unless otherwise provoked first. The final and most disturbing provision of the HPA which reeked of Lucius Malfoy's handiwork involved the subservience of any non-pureblood or non-old family member to an order from either a pureblood or old family member. Hermione was suddenly much happier that she had accepted Emmeline's offer of wizard guardianship.

By the end of the meeting, the order was confronted with a very grim reality for the short term. Not only would they be forced to fight the war against Voldemort, but now the war would be fought on another front, as the ministry and Fudge conspired against them also.

A/N: Please review. So the ministry made its move at last. I would love some reviews to indicate how you like the direction of the story. Next chapter will involve some long overdue discussions with Sirius about Regulus and Dumbledore about Horcruxes. Also, for those that are interested I will be spending some time dealing with Emmeline and who she really is. Thanks for reading and reviewing.

Chapter 33

Harry awoke the next morning and had an enormous amount of pent up frustration remaining from the previous night. He was prepared to unleash his frustration in the dueling room in an attempt to take his mind off of his bigger problems. After he ran a longer than normal six miles, he took out some more of his frustration at the ministry on the punching bag, until he heard someone clear their throat.

Harry turned around and saw Sirius leaning against the entrance of the room with a sad smile on his face. Sirius quietly asked, "Have you sufficiently beaten your demons up, or should the minister still fear your unholy wrath."

Harry chuckled which appeared to startle Sirius a little before he answered, "You make it sound as if I am some angsty teenager Paddy."

Sirius shrugged and replied, "Sometime I forget that short of Dumbledore, you are the most patient person I know."

Harry smiled and replied, "I don't necessarily know about that Padfoot. But, I tend to deal with my problems before they can become problems if at all possible."

Sirius nodded slowly looking at Harry very strangely before he shook his head as though he was waking up. Finally, he managed to say, "You know, a year ago at this time I was hiding out in a cave with Hippogriff. Now, I'm in my own house living with my godson who smells like a hippogriff. It's amazing how the more things change, the more they stay the same."

Harry mockingly replied, "Very funny, you old mutt." Sirius chuckled before Harry's face became very sad and he asked, "Can we talk after I grab my shower?"

Sirius nodded before he asked, "What's the matter kiddo?" Harry sighed and gave him a look that indicated he would tell him when they talked.

Harry got a nice long hot shower before he went downstairs to grab some breakfast. He was surprised to find Hermione and Emmeline locked into a very friendly conversation. He gave Hermione a kiss on the lips before he asked, "Anything you ladies would care to share?"

Hermione shook her head and replied, "I think it was you who told me at this very table that it was a guy thing and I wouldn't understand. Well, this is a woman thing, and you wouldn't understand."

Harry chuckled before he took his seat next to Hermione and whispered in her ear, "Sirius and I are going to have a long talk today, so why don't you and Emmy get to know each other a little better." Hermione smiled and gave Harry a peck on the cheek before they spent the rest of breakfast talking about their plans for Christmas, and Hermione made Harry promise to visit with her parents in the afternoon.

Sirius eventually came down and looked to Harry with concern before he noticed that Harry was laughing and holding hands with Hermione. He took his seat next to Emmy and gave her a kiss on the lips before he quietly asked, "So do you think they are trying to old divide and conquer on us?"

Emmeline smiled and whispered into Sirius' ear, "I think they just each need someone to talk to about things, and we are the two people they trust enough to do it with."

Sirius smiled and quietly replied, "I think that is probably some of it love. But, they are both marauders so there is probably some ulterior motive or other, to get some information out of me and you." Emmeline sighed and gave Sirius a kiss on the cheek before they glanced over at the topics of their conversation, with Harry whispering something into Hermione's ear which caused her to giggle uncontrollably.

When they finished breakfast Harry and Hermione met David and Elizabeth who were both barely awake. After Harry assured David that they could begin a game of *Risk* later on that day, and they both promised Elizabeth to watch a movie in their room after they dealt with some important issues for the remainder of the morning.

Harry found Sirius sitting in the parlor room reading the prophet seemingly oblivious to everything else in the world. Harry walked up to his adopted father, friend, and guardian before he somewhat shakily asked, "Can we maybe go somewhere and talk Sirius?" Sirius glanced up from his paper concerned at the tone of Harry's voice, and all of his concentration immediately shifted from the news of the first victims of the HPA to Harry.

Sirius stood up and quietly said, "Grab your coat, there is a place I want to show you."

By the time Harry returned dressed to brave the early winter chill in London, Sirius was waiting for him with a small smile on his face. Sirius said, "Well kiddo, I'm taking you to my secret place in the house that I go when I need to think. Once we get there we can talk about whatever you want."

After a few minutes of walking Harry arrived in a hallway near Sirius' room that he had only seen once before. At the end of the hall was a large hanging tapestry Harry had never noticed before. Sirius and Harry walked up to the tapestry before Sirius said, "This tapestry is of the Black family going back nearly 20 generations. Like the Black family, the Potter family was around at the time of the founders, and even before dating back to the time of Merlin. As you can tell by the burn mark around my name on the tapestry, I was disowned by my family. It happened following my fifth year at Hogwarts when I refused to become a deatheater."

Harry gaped and replied, "If you were disowned, then how is it that you have the house now?"

Sirius ran his hand through his hair and replied, "As the only living male heir, I was reinstated as the head of the house after I was pardoned. That's why my name has reappeared on the tapestry and if you look carefully, you'll find your name on it now too."

Harry looked at the tapestry and found his name on the tapestry along with Tonks' name which appeared to be newly placed there as well. Harry looked all over the tapestry and finally came upon the name Potter. Harry asked, "Is this Dorea Black my grandmum, on my

dad's side?" Sirius nodded before Harry added, "That would mean that Charlus Potter was my grandpa right?"

Sirius smiled sadly and replied, "Yeah kiddo, your grandpa and grandma Potter were two of the most wonderful people I ever knew. They took me in after I ran away from my parents and I was disowned. Short of adopting me, they were the closest thing to parents I ever had growing up. So in a way, we were related before I adopted you, but not enough to matter. You see, your grandma was my great aunt. As you can tell by their ages, they had your father later in their lives which explains the time gap."

Harry smiled and asked, "So this is your secret place then? Why did we need our coats?"

Sirius smiled and replied, "No it's not, but we are very close to it." Harry watched in fascination as Sirius touched his name on the tapestry and the wall slid open showing a staircase that led somewhere outside.

As they walked down the stairs Sirius said, "The passageway will also open when you and you alone touch your name on the tapestry. For now, let's keep that little secret to ourselves. Eventually we can tell Emmy and Herms if you want."

Harry chuckled and replied, "Just don't let her hear you call her that and we'll both live longer lives." Sirius laughed and they eventually came out into a small clearing with a large tree and the area around it appeared to be in perpetual summer.

Harry looked around and asked, "So, is this area enchanted to always be summer?"

Sirius laughed and replied, "Well, yes and no. It looks like it's summer but it is no warmer here than it is anywhere else outside. The one bright side is that we don't get any snow here. My uncle Alphard created this place for me when I was 8-years-old. If not for this place, I think I would have run away to your grandparents' house at a much younger age."

Harry nodded and then took a deep breath and asked the question he needed to, "Sirius, what can you tell me about Regulus?"

Sirius sighed and asked, "I'm sure there is a point to this. So why don't you tell me how you know anything about him aside from the fact that he was my brother."

Harry proceeded to tell Sirius of his dream of Voldemort and the mention of Regulus as having betrayed him about the locket. Sirius got a funny look on his face at the mention of the locket and Harry asked, "Do you know where the locket is Sirius?"

Sirius nodded and then said, "I think I have to explain Regulus' story a little before we go and get it." Harry nodded and Sirius continued, "Regulus was a year younger than me so growing up we were very close. We learned how to play Quidditch together and played pranks on each other constantly. But, after I returned from my first year at Hogwarts he had grown a little distant, a fact that I contribute directly to my mother and father's influence. You see, my parents fully supported the idea of pureblood supremacy and although I never subscribed to it Regulus spent an entire year being brainwashed into its truth at least partially."

Harry softly asked, "Was Voldemort around at that time?"

Sirius nodded slowly and replied, "At the time he was little more than a leader of thugs. But we all know how quickly that changed don't we?" Harry sighed sadly and Sirius clasped his shoulder gently and added, "It was that attitude back then that allowed that monster to gain the power he did. People like James and Lily spearheaded the change in public opinion in their years at Hogwarts. In fact your grandparents were the leader of the movement. Unfortunately that also made them a large target and eventually led to their deaths. You know it's a shame, the Potters you included Harry, are easily amongst the best and most decent people I have ever met, and all your family has to show for it is tragedy and sorrow."

Harry nodded and then asked, "I appreciate that Padfoot. But, what happened to Regulus when he went to Hogwarts?"

Sirius nodded and continued, "Regulus was sorted into Slytherin, although he wasn't a typical Slytherin, despite his lineage. He had friends in every house and we still spent a lot of time together. In fact, he even helped with some of the Marauder's pranks. It continued that way until my fifth year. Voldemort kept growing more powerful during that time, and my parents started pressuring both of us into joining his cause in order to bring glory to our family. Right after we returned the summer after my fifth year, I was given an ultimatum, of either joining the ranks or being disowned. I refused and was kicked out of the house rather unceremoniously with my wand, trunk, and the clothes on my back. I tried to bring Regulus with me but he assured me he would be fine if he stayed. That summer was the best of my life and James and I returned to Hogwarts ready to rule the school."

Harry softly asked, "You really were my dad's brother, in all but blood, weren't you?"

Sirius smiled and replied, "Yes, yes I was. I can never hope to know someone as well as I did James, but I'm willing to try to get to know you as well, if you'll allow me to."

Harry smiled and replied, "You already know the answer to that Padfoot." Then he frowned, "What happened to Regulus that year?"

Sirius frowned also as his eyes watered up a little before he answered, "I failed him kiddo." Sirius took a deep steadying breath before he continued, "By the time he came back to Hogwarts he was different, colder. He had become friends with Snape who I already knew as a deatheater the previous year. Every time I tried to talk to Regulus, I was blocked by Lucius who was a seventh year and Snapey. I could tell he had turned even if I never saw the mark on his arm. By the time I graduated from Hogwarts and the auror academy he was well known in many circles to be one of Voldemort's inner circle. It really doesn't surprise me that he had somehow found out about these Horcruxes. He was always exceedingly bright and once he realized the implications he realized he had to try to stop him. I only wish I could have seen him one last time."

Sirius finished as tears began to stream down his face, and Harry wrapped him up into a tight hug and they both cried for a few

minutes; before they slowly made their way back to the house to grab the locket that would forever remain Regulus' legacy to the light.

Meanwhile Hermione and Emmeline had started a conversation down in the dining room. Hermione found Emmeline reading a book on defense before she cleared her throat to get her wizarding guardian's attention and said, "Emmeline, I was wondering if we could spend some time today getting to know each other a bit better."

Emmeline smiled and motioned Hermione to a seat and said, "That sounds lovely Hermione. What would you like to know about me?"

Hermione smiled and asked, "How were your years at Hogwarts?"

Emmeline smiled and replied, "Well why don't I just start at the beginning and you can ask questions along the way?" Hermione nodded and smiled before Emmeline continued, "Well, my parents were a rather influential couple, they tried to shift popular thinking away from the pureblood supremacy ideology that has been prevalent in the in the ministry for far too long. I grew up in a house where it didn't matter if you were muggle, magical, or even beast. I was taught to teach all beings with respect."

Hermione commented, "They sound like they were lovely people."

Emmeline nodded and replied, "They were, but that is for a bit later in the story, so let's continue." Hermione smiled sheepishly and was waved off by Emmeline as she continued, "I arrived at Hogwarts with wide eyes the first time I saw the castle and watched as everyone was sorted. I was the last to be sorted, and found myself in Ravenclaw." Emmeline smiled and continued, "My first year at Hogwarts was tough because most people didn't want anything to do with the daughter of trouble makers like my parents. The only friends I managed to make were Lily Evans, Alice Longbottom, and surprisingly enough James Potter."

Hermione gasped and softly asked, "So you knew both Lily and James?" Emmeline smiled and nodded before Hermione continued, "What were they like growing up?"

Emmeline smiled and replied, "Honestly they were so different when they started Hogwarts. James was so kind and protective of his friends, but he had a mischievous streak that went for days. Lily was quiet, compassionate, and truthfully she was a bit introverted."

Emmeline shook her head at the memory and continued sadly, "Poor Lily suffered endlessly at the hands of people like Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape, who were always informing her that she was a filthy mudblood. James always tried to defend her, but Lily refused his help because she thought if it didn't kill her it made her stronger. Slowly as the years progressed, Lily became more outgoing and less shy; while James became more introspective and almost fiercely protective of his friends. James had professed to me in private on several occasions that he liked Lily a lot and needed my help as her friend, to get in her good graces. It was perhaps the most difficult thing I ever had to do, because I was secretly in love with James at the time."

Hermione gasped and asked, "I can't even imagine how horrible that must have been for you. How did you cope without telling him your feelings?"

Emmeline sighed sadly and replied, "I loved him too much to force him to choose my friendship over what I deemed must have been a silly crush I had on him."

Hermione smiled sadly and suddenly had thoughts of what her life had been like if Harry hadn't realized his feelings for her last year, and had realized he had feelings for Ginny instead. At the time she would have been happy if Harry had found someone he liked, and she would have pushed her feelings aside. Suddenly her heart went out even more to Emmeline, as she continued her story.

Emmeline added, "Also, around that time Sirius decided that he had a huge crush on me and began his attempts to woo me all the while I continued my attempts to help James win Lily. Lily slowly began to like James as more than a friend, but their relationship suffered a serious setback when James defended her from Lucius Malfoy early in their fifth year. Lily yelled at James for treating her like a piece of fragile glass and that she was able to defend herself. James was

heartbroken following their fight, and that was when everything began to spiral out of control.”

Hermione saw Emmeline’s sad expression and gently grasped the elder witch’s hand and asked, “What happened next Emmy?”

Emmeline smiled and continued, “It was November of our OWL year like you and Harry are in now. Deatheaters attacked my parents, and murdered them in their sleep. Their will left me in the care of Ollivander as his apprentice until my seventeenth birthday where I would assume control of my family’s estate. I joined the order soon after their murder, because I was looking for vengeance against those that had killed them.”

Hermione softly asked, “What happened to you and your friends after that?”

Emmeline sighed and replied, “James was so wonderful to me after that, but I realized he would never love me like I loved him. I began to realize that ending up with Sirius wouldn’t be too bad, so I got to know him the remainder of our fifth year.”

Hermione’s thoughts once again drifted, imagining how different things might have been if Harry hadn’t realized his feelings for her the last year. Certainly they wouldn’t have had the big blow up with Ron, and she knew Ron had a crush on her as early as third year which she never actually reciprocated. She probably would have gotten so depressed and despondent over not being able to have Harry, that she would have succumbed to Ron, more flattered by his attention than anything else. The parallels of her life to Emmeline’s could have been staggering.

Emmeline noticed Hermione’s thoughtful expression and asked, “What is it Hermione?”

Hermione frowned and replied, “I am just placing myself in your position. If Harry hadn’t gotten together with me I could see myself doing the same thing with our former best friend Ron, which you did with Sirius back in school.”

Emmeline nodded in understanding and replied, "For some reason, those Potter men just have something about them that makes it hard not to love them."

Hermione smiled wistfully before asking, "So, did you develop feelings for Sirius in Hogwarts?"

Emmeline smiled and replied, "All in due time Hermione; shall I continue?"

Hermione nodded and Emmeline smiled at the young girl's inquisitiveness before she continued, "By the end of our fifth year, James and Lily had made up after their big fight while Sirius and I grew progressively closer to Sirius and actually found that I did have some feelings for the big lug."

Hermione smiled and asked, "So then why didn't you get together after you were both out of school?"

Emmeline chuckled and gave Hermione a look indicating she was getting to it as she said, "The summer at Ollivander's was probably the most relaxing of my life, even in the face of Voldemort's reign of terror. By the time I returned for our sixth year Sirius had changed a lot and so had James and Lily. Lily's parents were killed the summer before sixth year, and James' parents had thwarted an attack at their house with the help of James and Sirius. The times were getting very dangerous and as a result it stunted a lot of relationships that were developing. I grew apart from Sirius that year, although James and Lily finally got together on Valentine's Day. They truly were wonderful together, and any lingering bitterness I may have had about them went away in not time at all."

By the time we had finished with Hogwarts, James and Lily had joined the order with me, and while Lily and I worked on research aspects for the order, James was amongst the top operatives we had with his auror training and reflexes. When James and Lily went into hiding with Harry I knew it was only a matter of time until something bad happened. Of course, I along with everyone else assumed Sirius would be their secret keeper. When they were murdered I raged for weeks about how wrong I had been about Sirius, and I really didn't recover from James and Lily's deaths until I met Sirius again this past

summer. Only then did I begin to heal from those old wounds. James and Lily were just that special, and I see a lot of them in Harry. But, Harry somehow possesses this additional quality of greatness, that I've only seen twice before. The other two were Albus Dumbledore and you."

Hermione gaped for a moment before Emmeline smiled and continued, "Embrace who you both are sweetie, and the wizarding world will benefit greatly from it."

Hermione smiled and replied, "Thank you Emmeline. Harry and I will do our best to defeat Voldemort and finish what your parents started all of those years ago."

Emmeline smiled and asked, "Ok, so now we know all about me. Now it's your turn to spill the beans about yourself and Harry."

Hermione smirked and replied, "How about we use the same deal you did. You ask a question and I'll answer it, if I can."

Emmeline nodded and asked, "Why don't you tell me a bit about growing up before Hogwarts?"

Hermione sighed and replied, "I really didn't have any friends in primary school and the only people I really talked to were my mum and dad."

Emmeline frowned and replied, "Ok, so tell me about your times in Hogwarts then."

Hermione smiled and replied, "Well I got on the train and shared a compartment with Neville Longbottom. He lost his toad boarding the train so we split up and went searching for Trevor on the train. That's when I first met Harry, and Ron, for that matter. We weren't friends initially, but I still begged the sorting hat to put me into Gryffindor where I was sure Harry would be put. I don't know why I did it except I thought he was cute and nice from my first impression and that was closest to a friend I'd ever really had at that point."

Emmeline smiled and asked, "So, you thought Harry was cute as a first year eh?"

Hermione blushed and replied, "Yes I did. But, that is neither here nor there. We weren't friends right off the bat, because Ron was actually quite rude and Harry never exactly defended me. Of course, Harry explained his behavior earlier this year to me, and I have forgiven it." Emmeline snorted and Hermione arched an eyebrow before she continued, "On Halloween Ron called me a nightmare, and Harry didn't disagree, so I was certain I would never have a friend. Little did I know that Harry felt terribly guilty about not defending me, so when our Professor told everyone in the great hall that there was a troll in the school; Harry immediately realized he needed to warn me, so he convinced Ron to come along and he jumped on the troll's back to save me. Ron used a spell to knock the troll out, and we were friends from then on out."

Emmeline nodded and then added, "At least until last year right?"

Hermione sighed and nodded before she said, "Second year I was petrified and Harry saved the school from the Basilisk in the chamber of secrets. Third year Sirius escaped from Azkaban and we were all certain he was after Harry. I used a time turner to take classes that year, and by the end of the year we figured out the truth about his innocence. Harry and I had to go back using the time turner, to save Sirius from nearly 200 dementors. That was the night I realized I was in love with Harry. Of course, you already know all about last year and this year so that is my life in a nutshell."

Emmeline smiled and said, "Perhaps someday, we can share our stories somewhat less abridged." Hermione giggled and they stood up and shared a hug before they walked back out into the main entry way to find a very sullen Harry and Sirius making their way down the stairs, with what appeared to be a locket in Harry's hand.

They both rushed over and wrapped their boyfriends up into hugs, before Sirius summarized everything with one word, "Regulus."

Hermione ushered Harry up to the library with the locket in his hand while Emmeline consoled Sirius about his younger brother.

Upon reaching the library Hermione sat Harry down and curled up into his lap. She gave Harry a deep kiss before she asked, "What happened sweetheart?"

Harry told Hermione about their talk and even described the Black family tapestry at length before he summarized Regulus' story. He finally said, "So in short we now have three Horcruxes accounted for, out of an indeterminate amount."

Hermione smiled and replied, "That might not be entirely true."

Harry arched his eyebrow and tickled Hermione before he said, "What exactly, does that mean 'Mione?'"

Hermione smiled and replied amidst her giggles, "I only tell you if you stop the torture love." Harry ceased his tickling and she blushed before she continued, "As I was saying before I was so sweetly interrupted. Back when Tom Riddle went to Hogwarts there was a widely held arithmantic belief that the number seven held special magical properties. It would make sense then that he created seven Horcruxes. Based upon the passage on Horcruxes that you shared with me in the book, there must be one in Voldemort's body. So, that means we have three Horcruxes accounted for out of seven, and we know of the location of one more."

Harry nodded and gave Hermione a kiss on the lips before moving his actions to her neck and earlobe. Hermione gasped before Harry said, "I am so glad you are on my side love."

Hermione smiled widely before she said, "We need to talk to Dumbledore about the Horcruxes this afternoon."

After they spent the next two hours snogging and caressing each other they cleaned themselves up and went downstairs to enjoy some lunch. They reached the dining room to find Dumbledore chatting with Sirius, Emmeline, and Hermione's parents. Albus spotted them and smiled before he said, "Ah Harry, Hermione just the two people I've been looking for. After we have a spot of lunch we need to discuss certain matters that have come to light thanks to Harry and Sirius this morning."

Harry smiled and added, "Hermione brought something important to my attention on that front also. I believe it will make our task much easier to complete." Albus arched his eyebrow before he nodded.

After a small lunch Albus led Harry and Hermione into the parlor room and put up some very strong privacy charms. The old wizard gestured them to their seats and said, "I understand you have found a locket that you believe to be a Horcrux left to Sirius by his brother Regulus. Is that correct?"

Harry nodded and manufactured the locket and placed it on the table. Albus waved his wand over it and uttered *priori incantem* revealing a long and complex spell in Latin that neither Harry nor Hermione had heard or read of before. Albus sighed and said, "It is as I feared. Tom has placed many curses on the locket to prevent us from dispatching of it easily."

Hermione pondered aloud, "Harry destroyed the diary with a Basilisk fang. Perhaps we can destroy the other Horcruxes like that?"

Albus smiled and replied, "A very intriguing possibility Hermione. Now what breakthrough did Harry speak of at lunch?"

Hermione smiled like she always did when she had a particularly brilliant answer to a question before she said, "I believe that Voldemort only created seven Horcruxes because at the time he had begun to create them the number seven was believed to hold certain magical properties. Of course it was proven to be a number like any other nearly fifteen years ago, but by then Voldemort would have already created his Horcruxes aside from Harry I would assume."

Albus' eyes twinkled as he replied, "I believe that is an excellent assertion Hermione. But, I must disagree as to your hypothesis of Harry being the most recent Horcrux. I believe Tom made Nagini, his pet snake, into a horcrux within the past year."

Harry and Hermione nodded before Harry spoke, "That would mean that we have knowledge of five of the Horcruxes already, with three in our possession or destroyed. The other two will have to be the last destroyed for obvious reasons. Now we just have to figure out what the other two Horcruxes are and destroy them."

Albus smiled and replied, "While it sounds easy when it is said in such terms. I believe the other two Horcruxes will be considerably more difficult to track down. Fortunately, Tom has split his soul down

enough times where he will not be foolish enough to create more Horcruxes. Unfortunately, based upon Harry's dream Tom has made haste to fortify the defenses he has surrounding his Horcruxes and he will assume that we have no clue of the true nature as to Harry's scar. We shall not give him reason to believe we suspect anything until we are ready to confront him. I will research Tom's history, and with any luck I will be able to track down the final two Horcruxes."

Harry nodded and asked, "Is there anything specific you would like Hermione and me to research?"

Albus smiled and replied, "The task set forth for the both of you is to conquer your OWL's, and to keep the defenses of the school intact. Perhaps it would also be prudent to keep up the progress you have achieved in the DA, and to keep your distance from Madam Umbridge and her followers."

Harry and Hermione nodded before Albus concluded the conversation by saying, "I believe you have both earned a well deserved day of relaxation tomorrow. Harry, David has also impressed upon me that you must join him in a game of you-know-what this afternoon. For now, I would suggest you both enjoy your vacation and engage in typical teenager behavior."

Harry chuckled before he gave Hermione a kiss on the lips and replied, "I think we can manage that sir."

A/N: A little break in the action that chapter. I hope you all enjoyed the little story of Emmeline Vance. Tell me how you think I handled her story and Regulus' story. Next chapter will involve a very eventful trip to Diagon Alley and an interesting proposal from Hermione. Keep up the great reviews and thanks for reading all.

Chapter 34

Harry awoke the next morning realizing it was Christmas Eve, and that he had to finish his shopping later that day, on a rare trip to Diagon Alley that Albus had actually authorized. Harry figured it was allowed because he was probably the second most dangerous wizard in the order, and he was closing fast on the most dangerous. Hermione could certainly hold her own in a duel also, so with a small order contingent for security, the trip had been approved.

After his daily morning workout Harry made his way down to the dining room to enjoy a quiet breakfast, with Hermione and her parents. He was surprised to find Hermione sitting alone at the table, and with a look on her face that indicated that they had serious business to discuss.

Harry took his normal seat next to her and softly asked, "Did I say something wrong last night?"

Hermione's serious expression melted away into a smile and she placed her hand on Harry's cheek before she said, "No Harry, this is about something else."

Harry's eyes shone with the fear that she might be breaking up with him, so he quietly asked, "It's ok you don't have to say it. I know how aggravating I can be and I don't blame you for wanting more than I can give."

Hermione took a moment processing what Harry said before she frantically said, "No, no Harry this isn't me breaking up with you. You have been perfect don't worry about that sweetie."

Harry's face went from sad to relieved, before he became concerned and asked, "Then what's the problem love?"

Hermione took a deep breath and replied, "It's about the book you gave me for our anniversary. Do you want to make what we have here, forever? I mean it is a huge commitment, and I would understand if you wouldn't want anything this permanent."

Harry smiled and put both of hands on Hermione's face to bring her eyes to his. He looked deep into her eyes to show he had no hesitation and said, "Hermione, if you want to spend eternity with me, I'd be a fool to refuse you. Just point me in the proper direction and we'll do it this morning."

Hermione released a deep breath and made a positively radiant smile before she answered, "Good, because I kind of had it all set up, so that we could do it this morning. Seeing as it is close to the ancient pagan holiday of Yule that fell a few days ago. That fact combined with the ambient magic associated with the holiday, would make the ritual stronger now then if we did it at any other time. The reason for this is because; well, the sentiments of the holiday are most strongly peace, love, and harmony. If we do the ritual this morning there will be a full binding between us, and we will have the additional blessing of eternal harmony."

Harry smiled and replied, "It sounds perfect. Do you have the book, so I can read it over to make sure I don't screw up my part?"

Hermione smiled and manufactured a scroll. She smiled and said, "This piece of parchment outlines everything you need to do for the ritual. I assumed you would want to do everything perfectly, so I made it up for you, hoping you would agree to go through with it."

Harry gave Hermione a kiss on the lips and replied, "I love a woman that is always prepared. Makes things less complicated for us simple menfolk." Hermione giggled and they enjoyed the remainder of breakfast in quiet, as Harry carefully read the parchment and Hermione was content as she watched Harry read the same parchment.

After breakfast Hermione led Harry up to the library and she spelled the door shut and put up the most powerful privacy charms she could before she led Harry over to the couch where a ritual circle had been drawn in chalk and a ruby and emerald were acting as foci for the ritual.

Hermione stood Harry next to the ruby and said, "We both need to chant the incantation on the paper at the same time. But, first we need to use a ceremonial dagger. Fortunately, I found 2 new silver

daggers down in the potions laboratory, that we can use for the ritual.”

Harry nodded and pulled out the piece of parchment before he took his dagger from Hermione and said, “Magic of my blood, bound to my soul, bind me to my mate.” Harry took the dagger and cut across his palm of his right hand covering the dagger in blood.

Hermione smiled and repeated, “Magic of my blood, bound to my soul, bind me to my mate.” She took the dagger and cut across the palm of her left hand covering her dagger in blood.

They each took their daggers and placed them in the center of the circle and left them in a cross. They stood over the daggers and wrapped their cut palms together before they each began to chant,

“My soul bound to yours, eternity shall never divide the whole we create. Bound by magic, bound by love.”

Once they finished chanting an emerald light shot out of Harry while a Ruby light shot out of Hermione. The lights went to the respective foci on each side of the circle before they were sent towards Harry and Hermione, with the ruby light striking Harry in the back while the emerald light struck Hermione in the back.

After a few minutes in which both were engulfed by the light they finally dimmed and both Harry and Hermione dropped to their knees with smiles on their faces. They were both breathing heavily before Harry finally spoke, “That was different.”

Hermione giggled and replied, “Yes, yes it was love. According to the book we’ll be able to sense each other’s emotions and our magic will be strengthened by the ritual gradually through time. Of course this will benefit me more than anything else, but I’m sure that’s ok with you isn’t it?”

Harry’s smile widened and he cheekily replied, “You know I’ll do anything to keep you safe love. If that means I’m stuck with you for eternity, I suppose I can make the sacrifice.”

Hermione playfully scowled before she stood up and helped Harry up. She pulled out her wand and healed the cuts on both of their palms before she flicked her wand and any evidence of the ritual was removed. Hermione looked rather pleased with herself before she said, "Well I don't think I've ever used a banishing charm, with that much success before."

Harry chuckled and replied, "Welcome to the Potter school of magic. Take your books and ignore them, except for the wand movement and incantation."

Hermione still smiling widely attempted to scoff and replied, "You might not have a use for the books but I still will."

Harry nodded and placated her by saying, "Whatever you say dearest."

Hermione nodded and added, "Keep saying that and you might just get your Christmas snog early love. Maybe I'll just give you a freebee today and still give you your snog tomorrow." Hermione giggled as Harry nodded eagerly. Hermione canceled all of the privacy charms and spelled the door open before Harry summoned the book on warding and they sat and read for the next couple of hours.

By noon they had nearly finished the book and Harry decided they both needed to get out of the library and do some visiting with everyone else for the day. They reached the dining room to find everyone enjoying a lively lunch as Sirius told David and Remus a joke while Tonks, Emmeline, and Elizabeth appeared to be in deep discussion about something else. Harry and Hermione sat down in their normal seats before the conversations both shifted towards them as Sirius asked, "When do you two want to go to the Alley for your shopping?"

Harry deferred to Hermione as he gave her hand a squeeze before she replied, "We just have to finish up our shopping, so right after dinner would work just fine. I doubt it will take either of us longer than an hour to get our shopping done." Harry nodded his assent to Sirius who smiled and nodded in acceptance.

Following lunch Harry and Hermione were separated as Emmeline and Tonks wanted to work with Hermione on some self defense techniques that would allow her to defend herself if she was without a wand. Little did any of the witches present know, but Hermione would be performing potent wandless magic by the end of the year, just as her boyfriend would be able to.

Meanwhile Harry joined David, Remus, and Sirius down in the man's room as Sirius so dubbed it. Sirius and Remus were playing wizard darts while Harry and David were in the throws of a rather intense game of risk. Harry had just successfully captured Russia from David when it was their turn to play Wizard's darts. The only difference between wizard's darts and muggle darts was that the darts were charmed to never go bad and the board was charmed to shift every turn so that a bit more thought went into each turn.

As Harry racked up 100 points with his turn David asked, "Harry, how do you feel about my daughter?"

Harry smiled softly and replied with no trace of anything other than honesty as he said, "She is the brightest part of my life sir. I honestly can't imagine my life without her there by my side. When the time is right, I will propose to her, and I will give her the wedding of her dreams. Afterwards, I will treat her with respect, and cherish every moment we have together. She'll never go wanting for anything, and neither will our children sir."

David's face indicated that he never expected such a thorough answer before he smiled and clasped Harry's shoulder and said, "That more than adequately answers my question Harry, thank you."

Meanwhile Hermione was being bombarded by question after question about Harry in the meeting of the female minds. Tonks asked first, "Hermione sweetie, how do you feel about Harry? I mean, we all saw you two come downstairs for lunch, and honestly you were glowing like I've never seen you before. Did you two get intimate this morning?"

Hermione's face went bright red before she indignantly answered, "Tonks! Where on earth would you get such an idea? Harry and I

have never gone farther than snogging, and while I am very much in love with him; I don't think either of us are ready for that quite yet."

Elizabeth questioned her daughter next as she asked, "If you weren't intimate this morning then why were you so radiant when you came down for lunch. While I doubt your father noticed anything, I noticed that something was different about you. Did Harry propose to you?"

Hermione began to grow frustrated and replied, "No, Harry did not propose to me. Harry is only 15. So, I seriously doubt that such an announcement will be coming for awhile. Do you want to know why I was "glowing" this morning? All the older women nodded before Hermione smiled wistfully and answered, "We each committed ourselves to an eternity of being together."

Tonks and Elizabeth looked confused as Emmeline's face dawned with comprehension and she asked, "Do you mean you bound your souls together?"

Hermione smiled and nodded appreciatively, as she fully expected no one else to understand what she was talking about. She motioned for Emmeline to continue as Elizabeth and Tonks watched in astonishment. Emmeline smiled slightly and continued, "Basically, there are certain rituals where if a couple is properly committed to each other they can bind their souls and magic together so that they will follow each other throughout eternity. While the effects of such a rare binding are debated, there have been documented cases where an individual from such a couple can survive a killing curse because that spell is only strong enough to strip one soul and such couples in essence are sharing one supersoul, or an amalgamation of two souls. The only other side effect I've heard of is that the witch or wizard gain their mates magic in addition to their own." Emmeline's face dawned with revelation before she continued, "That would make Harry and Hermione the most powerful witch or wizard in Great Britain aside from Voldemort alone, and maybe even more so than him. If they aren't the most powerful witch and wizard in the world I would be extremely surprised."

Hermione merely smiled and nodded as Tonks managed to sputter out a strangled, "Wotcher."

Elizabeth concerned about her daughter asked, "Hermione, you know your father and I think the world of Harry. But, are you absolutely certain that he is the man you want to spend the rest of your life with?"

Hermione sighed and made a patient smile before she said, "Mum, I love Harry and he loves me. We've been together the past five years and we've never truly had a fight just to have a fight. He respects my opinions and I respect his. I trust him more than I trust anyone else and he has told me that he trusts me more than anyone else. Honestly I want to spend eternity with Harry and we talked about it this morning and he wants to spend it with me. You can say we are too young, but is there really an age requirement on finding the man you love and realizing it?"

Elizabeth smiled and nodded before she simply said, "I trust you honey. I just wanted to know that you've put some thought into this."

Hermione nodded and the remainder of the girl talk session was spent discussing what dress Hermione was going to wear for the Valentine's Day ball. By the time they were ready to go to Diagon Alley, Harry and Hermione wanted nothing more than to crawl in a hole following their all afternoon sneak attack perpetrated by the adults of the house.

Harry met Hermione and the entrance to the parlor room and they each shared relieved grins on their faces before Harry swept Hermione into a hug and kissed her deeply before Sirius cleared his throat and tried to look disappointed in Harry's behavior, but he failed terribly. They took the FLOO network to the Leaky Cauldron where Tom greeted them warmly and whispered something in Harry's ear which caused him to laugh. Hermione could feel a tickle in the back of head and she almost immediately knew that she was feeling Harry's amusement at whatever it was that Tom had said. While the book didn't mention it as a side effect she wasn't terribly surprise by it because she had similar feelings about Harry's mood even before the ritual and it stood to reason that those feelings would be stronger after it.

Harry looked across the room at Hermione and a strange look graced his features; before he shared a knowing look with her and arched his eyebrow and gave her a goofy smile. Harry made his way over to Hermione took her hand gently and said, "So that's how you feel about me huh?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "That's only the beginning of how I feel about you Harry. You have the rest of your life and then eternity to figure out everything else." Harry smiled as they stepped into Flourish and Bott's to pick up some stocking stuffers and perhaps a small last second gift for each other.

Harry was glancing around when a familiar hand grasped his shoulder and he turned to see Mathias standing there with a man who looked similar but had brown hair on his head instead of the blonde hair of his son. Harry smiled and said, "Hey Mathias, how is your break going mate?"

Mathias smiled and replied, "It's nice to be out of Hogwarts." He frowned and added, "But I miss Luna terribly. Of course don't tell her I said that." They shared a look that conveyed the time tested oath of man, the same man that made fire and created the wheel.

Finally, Mathias' father cleared his throat as Harry and Mathias chuckled at their silliness. Brent Stern had the look of a man that had seen terrible things in his life but come to grips with them. He smiled and said, "Ah young Harry, so nice to see you once again."

Harry arched his eyebrow and replied, "I'm sorry sir, but I don't believe I've ever met you."

Brent laughed and retorted, "I never said you would remember me young man. I knew your parents reasonably well. In fact, you played with Mathias over here a few times before you turned one. Then your parents went into hiding, and this is the first time I've seen you in person since then. You are a testament to your parents though, and they'd be very proud of the man you are becoming."

Harry smiled and said, "Thank you sir. I'm sure I'll meet them once again and then they can catch up on what they missed."

Brent smiled and said, "You're a wise young man Harry. In fact, if I ever met you in the dark I'd say your last name was Dumbledore. We both must be going, but Mathias wanted to reintroduce me and I have found our meeting to be quite enjoyable." Brent bowed slightly and made his way for the exit.

Mathias rolled his eyes at his father before he said, "Well mate, the only person he has ever talked to like that before is Moody. I think he likes you. Anyways I need to be going, we'll exchange gifts on the train ok?" Harry smiled and nodded as Mathias sprinted out of the store to catch up to his father.

Harry shook his head and walked over to the section Hermione was in. He spotted her intently paging through a book when he came up behind her and gave her a hug and said, "Well, I just had a very interesting meeting."

Hermione turned her neck in his embrace and asked, "Who did you meet Harry?"

Harry replied, "I met Mathias' father Brent. He reminded me a lot of Moody, except he was softer somehow. It was like he survived the war and instead of becoming paranoid like Moody he remained grounded by something."

Hermione spun in his hug and gave him a kiss on the lips before she sagely asked, "Isn't it obvious Harry?"

Harry's face took on a contemplative look before he said, "It was the fact that he had a family wasn't it?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "I knew I loved you for more than your looks."

Harry mock pouted before Hermione gave him a deep kiss. She broke the kiss and Harry said, "I definitely know I love you for more than your looks. But, Merlin do you look good." Hermione giggle and dragged Harry to the counter where they separately paid for their books and met back up with their escorts.

Hermione looked at Harry and he said, "Could you pick up a present for both Crookshanks and Hedwig in the owl emporium and the menagerie. I need to pick up some stuff from Madam Malkin's and then I'll be all done shopping."

Hermione smiled and gave Harry a kiss before she said, "I'll just get twice as much as what I was going to get them then. By the way, you better hope you are getting something for me from Madam Malkin's." Harry arched his eyebrow and smiled as he was led to Madam Malkin's by Sirius and Emmeline as Remus and Tonks led Hermione to the magical menagerie to pick up the treats for Crookshanks.

Harry entered Madam Malkin's and he was immediately greeted by the older witch when she said, "Ah, Mr. Potter I was wondering when you'd make your way on here. Your orders are ready, as are the gift certificates you requested."

Harry smiled and nodded before he asked, "Would it be possible to see the order before I pay for it. I would like to have an idea of what they'll be pulling out of their boxes tomorrow morning." Madam Malkin nodded and she led Harry, Sirius, and Emmeline to the back room of the shop to find three large boxes sitting on her desk. Madam Malkin flicked her wand and the three boxes opened exposing three exquisite dragonhide vests and pants.

Harry smiled and asked, "These are spelled to always fit correct?" Madam Malkin nodded and he continued, "They have also been cured to block all hexes short of the Kedavra right?"

Madam Malkin sighed and nodded before she said, "They will not block strong hexes but they will deflect the majority of the hexes so that they will no longer be lethal." Harry smiled and with a flick of his wand the boxes lids covered them and the boxes were wrapped in various conjured wizard themed wrapping paper. Harry shrunk the boxes and pocketed the two gift certificates he had also purchased.

As he prepared to exit and go find Hermione he turned to Madam Malkin and said, "Thank you for doing such an excellent job on these for me Madam Malkin. They will put a lot of my fears to rest." Just as Harry finished he felt the ground reverberate and with a quick glance to Sirius and Emmeline he knew that an attack was about to begin.

He looked at Madam Malkin and calmly said, "Anyone currently in the store, stay here unless you are an auror. Madam Malkin perhaps you could escort everyone into your cellar because I believe an attack by giants and anything else Voldemort can muster is about to begin."

Meanwhile at the other end of the Alley Hermione had just finished purchasing enough owl and kneazle treats for Crookshanks and Hedwig that neither familiar would have a shortage for the entirety of the coming year. Hermione was smiling brightly well aware that Harry was getting her something from Madam Malkin's when she glanced over to Remus and Tonks who were leaning against each other near the entrance of the store. She said, "Remus, Tonks I think we are all done here." Then she stopped as she felt a wave of concern and anger flow through Harry which after a moment of thought led her to one conclusion as she frantically looked at the pair, "Guys, we are about to be attacked."

Remus nodded and had everyone in the store escorted to their emergency shelter before the order members honorary and official stepped out of the office to see in the distance, near Madam Malkin's the ominous sight of at least twenty giants and several deatheaters marching into the Alley.

Almost immediately Harry, Emmeline, and Sirius were battling with the combined forces of Voldemort as a few aurors on patrol joined in on the fight. Harry watched as he downed a pair of deatheaters and bound them as a couple of the aurors dropped to flashes of green light. Harry had to duck the curse once himself before he ducked a kill shot aimed at him from the club of the lead giant.

He swished his cloak and vanished. only to reappear behind the leader of the giants, and with a pair of carefully aimed *bombardias* he brought the giant to his knees and then with a flick of his two wands brought the club down to the head of the giant knocking him out before he placed the large man in a cage of flame and continued the fight against a couple of deatheaters eager to move up the ranks by killing him.

Nearly half a mile away, Emmeline and Sirius were working together on a scattered group of deatheaters both new and old. As they

collectively downed a couple more deatheaters Sirius would anxiously glance over in Harry's direction, only to see a steadily growing pile of unconscious deatheaters and giants where his godson battled.

Meanwhile Hermione and her two guards were frantically fighting the balance of the deatheaters in the battle as Harry dealt with the giants at the other side of the alley. Hermione was holding her own in a running firefight with nearly a dozen deatheaters that was rapidly becoming depleted as Hermione used her newfound abundance of magic to its maximum potential.

Hermione never noticed as a brick from a shattered store front was levitated behind her and struck her in the back of the head dropping her into an ungraceful heap on the ground. Lucius Malfoy sneered as he casually walked up to her and he said, "It appears as though I will have the pleasure of destroying Potter's mudblood, once and for all."

Through their link Harry could sense Hermione's feelings become muffled and he immediately knew she had been knocked out. As he eyed the last two giants separating him from the rest of the fight, his eyes glowed with his love for Hermione and he casually dispatched of the last two monsters with *reducto* curses to their heads. Harry trembled slightly as he watched giant blood explode outward, and onto his face and cloak. Fighting down a bout of nausea at the fact that he had just killed two beings, he swished his cloak and reappeared at the other end of the alley as he watched Lucius Malfoy raise his wand to kill Hermione.

Harry smiled as he brought both of his wands up and silently cast a cutting hex and a cauterizing charm effectively leaving Lucius Malfoy without the use of his wand hand for the rest of his natural life. Malfoy gasped and looked at Harry, whose eyes were smoldering in green fire, before the scion of Malfoy family apparated away. In his haste he left behind his trademark snakehead wand amidst the rubble of Diagon Alley, which would prove to be his last failing as a productive member of society. Lucius Malfoy was about to transform from a respected leader of the community, to a despised follower of Voldemort. Harry quickly revived Hermione with one wand, as he

destroyed Lucius Malfoy's hand with a nearly absent minded *reducto*, with his other wand.

Hermione's eyes fluttered open to see the pair of green eyes she loved so much hovering over her with concern and love etched into them. She smiled as he helped her up and said, "So I suppose I have you to thank for still being amongst the living don't I?"

Harry managed a half hearted smirk before he replied, "Wouldn't be the first time love." Their moment of banter was cut short as the dozen deatheaters that had been engaged with Hermione unleashed a barrage of spells as Harry and Hermione both conjured shields adorned with coyotes before they dispatched of the remaining dozen with chilling ease.

As the battle died down one of the deatheaters frantically cast the mark above the alley, and apparated away. Harry spotted Sirius as he along with Emmeline had somehow grouped together with Remus and Tonks by the end of the battle. Sirius and Harry's eyes met and before they even had time to vocalize the next wave the telltale cold associated with arriving dementors, swept over the Alley.

Harry and Hermione grimly watched as nearly 100 dementors swooped down towards them until they both cast out their patroni and they stood amazed as the doe and stag attacked the dementors together, and left in their wake several empty and sizzling black cloaks fluttering down to the ground. The remaining dementors noticed the loss of nearly thirty of their brethren, and they exited with haste before their limited numbers could be diminished any further.

As Harry and Hermione glanced around at the devastation, their four adult guards ran up to them and with a nod they all vanished with the telltale pop of apparition back to the safety of Black Manor. Nearly ten minutes after they left, around fifty ministry aurors arrived at the devastation that remained at Diagon Alley. However, of all the casualties the light had only suffered eight deaths while a force of nearly twenty giants had been killed or captured along with thirty dementors' cloaks and around seventy deatheaters. The message to Voldemort and the ministry had been made loud and clear.

A/N: Please review. Hopefully I can get twenty reviews for this chapter before I write the next chapter. Tell me what you thought of the battle at Diagon Alley. Also special thanks go out to *crystal h.* as she pointed me in the right direction for the ritual between Harry and Hermione. Thanks for reading and keep up the reviews.

Chapter 35

Following the attack on Diagon Alley Harry and Hermione were placed in their respective beds and given dreamless sleeping draught so that they could stall the horrors of the day for a bit longer. The potion wore off by 4 am Christmas morning and with a jolt, Harry rolled out of bed immediately processing the previous day.

He skipped his typical morning run and let out a hot bath and simply soaked in the warmth of the water, trying to remove some of the chill that had wrapped itself tightly around his heart. After he realized what had actually happened his concern about taking the lives of the two giants paled in comparison to the potential trouble that could come of publicly fighting against Voldemort's combined forces. Harry's thoughts drifted to the law against a militia and he silently prayed no witnesses could place them in the battle specifically.

Meanwhile in Hermione's bathroom the young witch was also taking a bath while she very carefully read a book on the ministry bylaws. While she read the book she also cross referenced the new laws passed by the minister with some contradicting terminology in the constitution of the ministry. As she read she suddenly frowned feeling Harry worry in the back of her mind, before his worry shifted into a bit of a more cunning mindset that intrigued her enough to get out of the comfortable warmth of the tub and investigate what Harry was up to.

Harry had finished his bath and gotten dressed, when he heard the familiar pitter patter of Hermione making her way to his room. He was wearing a soft sweater and a pair of jeans as he grabbed the small boxes he had gotten from Madam Malkin's and removed the shrinking charms he had placed upon them.

Hermione entered the room through the opened door as she was also wearing a soft sweater and jeans but was walking around on the hardwood floors of the manor barefoot. They shared a look that easily conveyed everything they each hadn't deduced from their emotional connection, before Hermione verbalized her concerns, "Do you think the ministry has any idea that we were the ones who stopped the attack from being a massacre yesterday?"

Harry took a deep breath and replied, "Well, seeing as how anyone that was able to see us fight is dead, I don't think the ministry can do anything to us specifically. But, they may start taking action on suspected order members."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully before she glanced at the boxes in Harry's arms and asked, "Is it safe to assume that at least one of those boxes are for me?"

Harry gave her a crooked smile and replied, "Oh, I imagine one of these might be, and maybe some more downstairs." Hermione stuck out her tongue at Harry before she playfully stomped out of the room with Harry right behind bearing gifts.

When they reached the parlor room, which had been converted by Dobby and Winky into a cozy room for Christmas morning Harry and Hermione took the same large chair that Harry had used for reading so frequently during the summer. Hermione curled up in Harry's lap as he wandlessly levitated the remainder of the gifts under the large tree that Sirius had procured from a muggle Christmas tree salesman.

It was still quite early in Black Manor and everyone that would be celebrating in the household was still sleeping aside from the young couple. Harry summoned the book on warding as Dobby fetched them a couple of cups of tea.

After nearly a half an hour quietly reading and waiting for the others, Harry sighed and nuzzled Hermione's neck as he slowly kissed his way up her neck to nibble on her ear. Hermione giggled before Harry moved to her lips and finally she stopped reading and focused her full attention on Harry. After several blissful moments spent kissing each other they slowly separated at the sound of someone clearing their throat.

Harry looked up to find a somewhat amused David and Elizabeth as he felt Hermione bury her face in his chest and giggle uncontrollably. Harry smiled and said, "Merry Christmas Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Hermione is currently, um unavailable but she'll be able to talk here in a minute."

David and Elizabeth shared a small chuckle before a beet red Hermione finally extracted herself from Harry's chest and timidly said, "Hello mum and dad; Happy Christmas."

Elizabeth took pity in her daughter and replied, "Merry Christmas you two. I think the mistletoe is over on the other side of the room though." Harry and Dan chuckled before the elder Grangers took their seat next to Harry and Hermione.

Everyone else had sorted into the parlor room shortly after and Sirius was wearing a Santa Clause hat as he had elected himself the official gift herder of the house.

Harry had gotten several interesting and rare books from everyone and the intriguing gift of a certificate to Ollivander's to have a staff made courtesy of Dumbledore.

Hermione had gotten even more books than Harry and the same certificate for a staff from Dumbledore that Harry had received. Sirius had gotten Hermione a book on the history of the Potter family and left a note indicating that Potter men always had a propensity for marrying some of the brightest witches of the age.

As the gifts began to dwindle Sirius floated a pair of gifts to Harry and Hermione with a large smile on his face. Harry and Hermione shared a look before they carefully opened their packages to find a pair of helmets. Harry and Hermione shared a look before Hermione spoke for them both and asked, "Sirius, what are these helmets for?"

Sirius smiled and replied, "Well, I know how much Harry loved riding in my bike, so I contacted some people and we devised a new bike for the two of you to share. It's an old BMW R71 motorcycle that I've outfitted with the fixings. It has amazing protection charms on it and could probably survive a couple of killing curses intact. This bike is to be both of your chance to get away from the troubles of this war. This coming summer you both will be taking the road test to drive it legally on the streets and if the mood strikes fly your bike around. Harry you mean the world to me and Hermione you are a shining light, in the dark world for everyone around you. I know you both think you need to be mature every moment of every day. Well, I'm here to tell you that you don't and this bike gives that freedom without forcing you do

it in the constraints of this house or even Hogwarts. Enjoy your teenage years guys because they will be gone in a blink and Voldemort will have stolen something else from you.”

Harry and Hermione both stood up and shared a tight and emotional hug with Sirius, both amazed at how perceptive he actually was and also being proactive enough to give them the responsibility and potential privacy such a gift would entail.

After they broke the hug Harry sat back down in their chair with Hermione curling up in his lap. He called for Dobby and Winky and manufactured his gift certificates. He smiled at the pair and said, “Dobby, Winky I got you each a Christmas present.”

Dobby stammered, “It is not clothing is it, Harry Potter sir?”

Harry smiled and replied, “No, we don’t wish to fire you as you both have done an excellent job. Although we have to discuss giving the both of you a raise of at least a few sickles a week. Actually, the gift I am giving you is a gift certificate to Madam Malkin’s. You may get anything you want from Madam Malkin’s from this. It is an offer of clothes and I am not forcing you to take anything other than the certificate as a token of my appreciation. Think about using this though because you both could use some clothes for doing stuff besides working here. Think about it ok?”

Dobby and Winky shared big smiles before they attached themselves to Harry’s legs and hugged them while they each cried from happiness. After they both vanished with soft pops Hermione gave Harry a deep kiss and said, “You’ve really made progress with the both of them Harry. They didn’t argue about you giving them a raise and after you explained the gift they accepted it without an argument.”

Harry smiled and then said, “Now that we’ve gotten down to the last three gifts, I suppose I should hand them out shouldn’t I?”

Hermione gave him a quick kiss on the lips before she nodded like a five year old on Christmas. He chuckled and levitated the gifts to Hermione and her parents. They all looked at him questioningly before Harry explained, “You know I worry about all three of you and I

guess if I explain that in more detail it might help.” They all nodded and Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck in a show of support.

Harry sighed and continued, “David and Elizabeth, you are Hermione’s parents and by proxy will be mine someday. I want our children to have one set of grandparents and then on my side I can contribute a pair of great uncles that know how to have fun.” Harry finished with a grin he flashed at both Sirius and Remus whose eyes were twinkling madly.

Harry continued, “Since you both have insisted on being operative for the order I have taken steps to ensure your safety from anything short of the killing curse.” Harry waved his hand and their two boxes opened revealing two exquisite and surprisingly stylish dragonhide vests. Harry smiled and replied to their awed expressions, “These vests are made from the hide of the most spell resistant dragon in the world, the Hungarian Horntail. The jackets are charmed to look like normal clothes to all muggles and wizards won’t ever see them because they are to worn under your normal clothes. They are also charmed to fit like a second skin to your body. This is my insurance policy that our children have grandparents.”

Hermione softly asked, “It’s a wonderful gesture Harry, but why do I need a vest, because I’m not an order operative?”

Harry gave his girlfriend and for all intents and purposes other half a patient smile and replied, “Hermione just being my girlfriend opens you up to more inherent danger than your parents will be in. You’ve already made it clear to me that you will follow me wherever I go so this is my way of giving you more of an edge than those we will be fighting against. Dragonhide vests aren’t exactly common, in fact aside from the people in this room I could only think of two other people that might have them. That would be Moody and Albus. Do you understand now why I want to do this for you?”

Hermione smiled and replied, “Yes I do Harry, and I love you so very much for that and a million other reasons.” Harry smiled and gave her another kiss before he pulled away and held her tightly to him. After they had cleaned up all of the mess from the various gifts they had

received Sirius led them outside and showed everyone the bike that he had gotten them for Christmas. It was really quite stunning and yet had a certain added element of being elegant with and understated style to it, very much like Harry and Hermione in so many ways.

After Sirius handed Harry the keys he winked and quietly spoke to Harry, "After we get you two squared away we are going to go away for a weekend and we'll bring Emmy and Hermione to fill our sidecars. I have a little cabin up by Stranraer and we can just enjoy a little peace and quiet by the water." Harry smiled and nodded before they headed back into the main portion of the house leaving their bikes behind in the heated garage.

Once they reached the entrance hall of the Manor Remus approached them warily and said, "Paddy, Harry we have an order meeting tonight to discuss the attack yesterday and how the ministry is dealing with it." Harry and Sirius nodded before they returned to the parlor room to grab the gifts and begin returning the Parlor room to operating function for an order meeting.

Harry found Hermione up in the library as she was doing some research on the dragonhide suits Harry had gotten her and her parents. He smiled as she was doing just as he expected, intently reading a book on the various uses of dragonhide.

Harry put his hands on Hermione's shoulder and softly said, "Did you have a good Christmas?"

Hermione turned into his hands and it became a hug before she said, "It was the best Christmas I've ever had. How about you?"

Harry arched his eyebrow and softly replied, "Not that I have a lot of Christmas' to compare this to, but I would have to say it has been my best Christmas too."

Hermione made a sad sound and buried her face in Harry's shoulder before he felt her tears soak into his sweater. He gently pulled her back and wiped the few lingering tears on her face before he said, "Of all of the people I know, you are the one that did the most to get me out of the Dursleys. Let's not concentrate on the past anymore ok love? We'll just worry about making more memories like the one we

made today.” Hermione made a soft smile and then gave him a peck on the lips before she returned to her book.

Harry joined her in her reading and even pointed things out about her dragonhide suit as they made their way through the book in a few hours. Harry had found that reading with Hermione had caused his own reading to speed up and that he retained more now than he had in the past. They both felt the warmth and acceptance they felt for each other as they finished the book and made their way down to the dining room to have an early dinner before the order meeting.

After their dinner they shuffled into the parlor room which had been completely transformed aside from the large decorated tree still in the corner nearest to Harry and Hermione’s seats. Hermione curled up on Harry’s lap into a position that they both were becoming confident was the most comfortable position for both of them. When they finally finished the book on warding, Harry was confident he could keep the wards at Hogwarts in working order and perhaps even improve the ones in existence. For the first time in quite a while the voice in Harry’s head made an appearance and spoke to him about warding against the dark mark to keep deatheaters out of Hogwarts.

Harry turned to Hermione his head swimming with the possibilities before he said, “Hermione what do you think about creating a ward to discriminate against the dark mark?”

Hermione turned in Harry’s lap so that she would be looking directly into Harry’s eyes before she asked, “What about Professor Snape?”

Harry sighed and ran his hands through his hair. He finally replied, “I like Professor Snape. In fact, I like him more than I’d have ever thought possible. But, if we could protect the castle from confirmed deatheaters isn’t that worth the sacrifice?”

Hermione scrunched her nose up showing her disgust at having the conversation before she reluctantly nodded and said, “We should talk to Dumbledore and Professor Snape about this and get their thoughts on the matter. If this goes through we’ll have a new potions professor for the second term and just in time for OWL revisions.” Harry nodded showing he wasn’t any happier with the thought of losing one of his

few allies in the school but willing to make the sacrifice for the overall safety of the school.

The room filled up and everyone took their normal seats around the table, but to the surprise of almost everyone Dumbledore arrived via the FLOO with a face neither Harry or Hermione thought they'd see again, Viktor Krum.

Dumbledore motioned the Bulgarian seeker to a seat next to him before he started the meeting and Fawkes chirped his approval. Albus smiled down the table at Harry and Hermione who had the decency to finally sit in different chairs for the first time that day.

Finally, content with the state of the room the old wizard spoke, "There is much to discuss tonight but I hope everyone enjoyed their Christmas in the care of loved ones. The attack yesterday at Diagon Alley has led to some unfortunate movements by the ministry against our organization that will limit us greatly in our current capacity. We will no longer be able to fight in the open and our primary focus will be gathering information. Do not get me wrong, those that fought in Diagon Alley have done everyone a great service, but the present minister of magic is currently in a state that he views anything not perpetrated by the ministry as a threat. Do not despair because I have it on good account that better times are ahead at the ministry. Not in the near future but by the time summer comes I believe we will be in much better position to deal with Tom and his followers. For now why don't we allow those that fought at Diagon Alley to describe the attack. I believe Remus can do the job admirably am I correct?"

Remus glanced at everyone else who had fought at Diagon Alley and they each gave him smiles of reassurance before he stood and addressed the room. "Yesterday evening Sirius, Emmeline, Tonks, and I were escorting Harry and Hermione to Diagon Alley so that they could finish the last bit of their Christmas shopping. We first stopped at Flourish and Bott's and afterwards we split up with Harry along with Sirius and Emmeline going to Madam Malkin's to pick up some gifts Harry had preordered. Tonks and I escorted Hermione to the Magical Menagerie and the owl emporium to pick up some gifts for her and Harry's familiars. Harry had finished his business at Madam Malkin's when he heard the approach of the Giant's coming from the distance

outside of Diagon Alley. He had everyone out in the streets and in the stores moved to safety sites in the stores before the battle began. Harry engaged the 20 giants while Sirius and Emmeline were pushed back by deatheaters towards the rest of us.”

Remus’ eyes flashed towards Harry and with a shake of his head he continued, “Harry screamed out that an attack was underway and Hermione helped organize the other half of the alley to get to safety. There were eight aurors on duty patrolling the alley when we started the evacuation and they aided us before we finally were confronted with the mass of the deatheaters. Harry had dispatched of the giants when Hermione had been knocked out by Lucius Malfoy. Harry saw what was happening and apparated next to him and cut off his wand hand with a cutting hex. Harry also indicated he used a permanent cauterizing charm making it impossible to fix his stump of a wand hand with magic.” The entire group save those that Harry was close to gasped in surprise of Harry doing something so seemingly cruel.

Remus shook his head at their expressions and continued, “Malfoy apparated away and the battle with the deatheaters had nearly wound down when a deatheater shot off the dark mark and the dementors swooped in. Harry and Hermione tandem cast their patroni and it was amazing. They actually killed thirty dementors with their patroni. The dementors retreated and we apparated away before the ministry could arrive. As it was, the eight aurors that helped us were killed in the battle. So, I find it unlikely that we could be specifically placed at the battle other than as the people who helped evacuate the alley.”

Albus eyed Harry and asked, “Harry, why did you take such drastic measures against Lucius Malfoy?”

Harry looked at the headmaster incredulously and replied, “What would you have preferred sir? Should I have captured him and allow him to claim he was under *imperius* again? No I think Lucius was fortunate I didn’t do more to him. He was prepared to kill Hermione and under no circumstances will that happen if I can do anything to stop it.”

Albus nodded before he motioned for Remus to continue, "From our estimations we had captured nearly 70 of the 100 deatheaters that were attacking while Harry had killed two giants and captured the other 18 on his own." There were a few gasps from people like Molly while Hagrid looked at Harry wearily before Harry reassured him with a small smile. Remus continued, "Harry and Hermione destroyed thirty dementors leaving about 270 dementors left in existence. I highly doubt they will attempt anything anytime soon with that knowledge fresh in their group."

Albus frowned and nodded before he said, "The troubling news I spoke of earlier involves the issuing of arrest warrants for suspected order members. The warrants are for me, Sirius, Remus, Dedalus, Severus, and Emmeline. I must impress upon all of you that I've mentioned that we must remain out of sight until these warrants can be cleared up." Albus straightened and added, "The news tonight has been a mixture of good and bad and I would like to conclude with some good news. I have recruited Mr. Krum here as a member of the order as he is to recruit and start a chapter of the order at Durmstrang to prevent rampant recruitment from the school." Everyone nodded before Albus concluded, "I believe there are some that wish to speak with me after the meeting so I call this meeting to a close."

Harry and Hermione made their way over to Dumbledore and made sure to motion Snape over as well. Harry addressed the two wizards, "We have finished the book on wards and I have come forward with a proposal that thanks to your announcement tonight will be considerably easier to institute."

Albus peered down his glasses and asked, "What is this proposal you speak of Harry?"

Harry smiled faintly and replied, "I plan on creating a ward for the school repelling or expelling any deatheaters to keep their influence free from the castle. If Umbridge is truly a deatheater it will be the easiest way to remove her and she will have no idea why she has been expelled from the castle. I regret to say it would prevent Professor Snape from teaching at Hogwarts once the ward is constructed but I have actually come up with a solution for that during the meeting. That is if he'd be interested."

Snape arched his eyebrow and said, "I am listening Potter."

Harry smiled and said, "I believe that I have access to some unplottable Potter family properties and I propose that you go into potions research full-time for the order. I would of course foot the bill for your supplies while you research things such as a cure to lycanthropy or repairing the effects of over exposure to the cruciatus curse. Do you accept sir?"

Snape had a genuine smile on his face as he answered, "It would be a pleasure Mr. Potter."

Albus looked contemplative for a moment before he said, "I believe it is likely Horace Slughorn will replace Professor Snape in his permanent absence. He will be a valuable tool if you use him properly Harry. It will take some time to develop such a ward but I have the utmost confidence that with Hermione's help you will complete the task with ease. Was that all you wished to discuss?"

Harry nodded and turned back to Snape and said, "I'll have the paperwork pushed through and I'll have the necessary funds placed in an account for you so that you can start your work before the New Year." Snape smiled and nodded before Albus joined him in the FLOO and they vanished in a flash of green fire after a mumbled destination.

The remainder of the break was spent developing the anti-deatheaters ward for the castle and Harry feverishly getting Snape settled into a small country cottage he owned in Ireland that suited the potion masters needs quite nicely, especially while he was a fugitive of the law.

Harry and Hermione also found the time to test their dueling skills against all takers and they quickly found that Harry was easily the best dueler of the group with a lethal combination of power and knowledge thanks to Hermione's work ethic.

After they dueled alone they moved on to dueling with partners. Initially Remus and Tonks were the best team but as Hermione continued to grow into her massive upgrade in magic, Hermione and Harry quickly became nearly unbeatable as a pair.

As their magic became nearly unbeatable the adults of the house decided it was time to teach the young couple some simple self defense techniques if their magic ever failed them. They broached the subject at breakfast two days before their return to Hogwarts.

Harry was sipping on some tea and reading the prophet as Hermione was leaning her head on his shoulder and reading along with him.

Sirius came down into the dining room and said, "Hey you two, we have a different kind of training for you two today."

Harry glanced back and asked, "What are we doing today Paddy?"

Sirius smiled and replied, "We are going to be teaching you both some beginners self defense. I know you are both beyond any of us aside from Dumbledore magically so we need to prepare you in case you find yourselves unable to use your magic. This summer we might do some weapon training. I have it on good account that Harry has a sword with his name on it back at the castle."

Harry arched his eyebrow before comprehension dawned on his face, "You mean Gryffindor's sword?"

Sirius chuckled and replied, "Yes I'm sure Albus told you that only a true Gryffindor could pull the sword from the hat. Well it's true kiddo; your family is descendant from Gryffindor himself."

Harry just shook his head and with a wry smile he replied, "Of course we are." Hermione giggled and they entered the training room to see the predatory looks all of the adults were giving them. By the end of the day it was a rather bruised and battered couple that wearily made their way out of the training room. They had each learned a lot about defending yourself in a fight and even the adults were impressed with the progress they made in their first day of the new training.

Harry looked around and gave Hermione a deep kiss before he smiled at her slightly dazed expression and asked, "Would you like to take a bath with me?"

Hermione gasped and replied, "Harry, I don't think I'm ready for that quite yet."

Harry's face grew serious and he added, "I never said we would be naked. I'll be wearing some trunks and you can wear whatever you want. I just wanted to relax with you." Hermione smiled and nodded and they parted, planning on meeting in Harry's large bath tub a few minutes later.

The next thing they knew they were back on the train weary of the semester ahead. Harry still had work to do on the deatheater ward so they both knew they would have to do their best to survive the assaults of Umbridge. Little did they know just how bad it was going to be once they returned to the castle they loved so much.

A/N: Please review. There was Harry's first real Christmas with family. I hope you all enjoyed it. Tell me what you think of Sirius' gift for Harry and Hermione. For some reason I can see Hermione riding in a motorcycle. Thanks for reading and keep up the great reviews.

Chapter 36

Upon their return to the castle the students of Hogwarts could for the first time feel what the absence of Dumbledore meant for them. Upon entering the castle they were searched by several ministry aurors searching for any contraband items that indicated that they were in league with any of the rogue militias that existed within Britain. The minister had been swift in his attempts to crush the militias, mainly out of fear that the upwelling of public support following the thwarted attack on Diagon alley would lead to his ouster as minister.

Harry and Hermione had prepared for such a search and accordingly as they had transfigured several books and notes and anything else that could be construed as order related, into chocolate frog packages. Several of the aurors had increasingly adventurous hands when they reached the prettier witches to frisk them. As Hermione watched the scene with trepidation Harry merely gave her a smile and wink as they approached their turn in the line.

Hermione was next in the line when the auror in her line eyed her up rather hungrily and she prayed that Harry knew what he was doing. Hermione raised her arms when directed to do so and when the auror was grinning preparing to feel her up she suddenly watched as the man's face contorted into pain before he began to itch wildly at his crotch. Hermione chanced a look at Harry who was also in the process of being frisked and he merely gave her a crooked smile even though his eyes belied how fiercely protective of her he was. Hermione walked past the checkpoint and met back up with Harry once they were inside the castle.

Hermione pulled into a little alcove near the stairway and gave Harry a proper snog for being the great boyfriend he was before she breathlessly asked, "What did you do to that auror?"

Harry smirked and replied, "Well I figured if he was so hot for you then he should have to deal with a slight burning sensation for a few weeks."

Hermione giggled as they made their way out to the staircase. They stepped onto the staircase and as it began to move she sighed and

looked around before she said, "From the looks of things Umbridge is going to make things miserable for us." Harry nodded as they reached the seventh floor and the safety of the Gryffindor common room.

Monday morning the great hall was filled as Umbridge had left notes in each common room making it mandatory to attend.

Harry and Hermione sat down across from Ron and Lavender who shot the pair a nervous glance before she tightened her grip on Ron's hand. Lavender was a pureblood witch and she knew of the HPA's effect on her friends like Hermione.

Umbridge stood and looked about the great hall before she began her speech like she did every other time, "Hem, hem. I have a few announcements to make for the remainder of the term. Professor Horace Slughorn has filled the void left by the now fugitive ex-head of Slytherin house Severus Snape. He will be having a group that will be by invitation only. I expect everyone that is invited to take advantage of the opportunity he has given." Harry noticed as the old balding wizard eyed Harry up rather hungrily as though he was a tasty steak. Harry shuddered until Hermione wrapped an arm around him and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Umbridge continued obviously unaware of the byplay and added, "The Heritage Protection Act will be staunchly enforced inside the walls of this school. It will be enforced by the six aurors we have here for the remainder of the year on loan from the ministry as well as the school's inquisitorial squad led by Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson. If you have any questions as to the HPA and its application please speak to either of them and they will aid you. I hope the rest of the term shall be a pleasant one. You are all dismissed."

Harry shared a look with Hermione as his stomach protested as he was forced to skip the most important meal of the day. One thing was certain however, it would be a term to remember for all of the wrong reasons.

As they sat in History of Magic Hermione was surprised that Harry was not dozing off like he typically did and then she realized he was dreading potions for the first time that year due to the look Slughorn

had been shooting him earlier. Hermione could feel the normal level of anxiety Harry had felt since earlier in the morning but now she also felt the same feeling of cunning that Harry had when he was planning something. She had felt it before but most recently she felt it on Christmas at the order meeting when Harry had come up with Snape's solution.

By the time they reached the dungeon for potions Harry had a smirk playing on his lips and Hermione was anxious to see exactly what Harry had planned for Slughorn. They entered the classroom and immediately noted that it was much lighter then when Snape had been the professor and a pleasant odor lingered in the air for everyone to inhale.

Harry and Hermione took their usual seats in the front of the class and as soon as the last students filed into the room, Professor Slughorn sauntered out of his office and over to his desk that was decorated by several pictures wizarding and muggle alike.

Slughorn gave the class a smile which reminded Hermione of a used car salesman for some reason, before he began to speak, "Welcome to the remainder of your OWL year potions class. Your previous professor left very detailed notes and grades of everyone in the class so I have a fair idea of what your respective strengths are. The remainder of the year we will be reviewing several common potions that will undoubtedly be on your OWL for this class. Today we will be working on the calming draught. The instructions are in your book and on the board. I will be making my way around the room to offer tips if they are necessary."

As Harry and Hermione measured their ingredients and worked their way through the rather simple potion Slughorn purposely made his way around the opposite side of the room as though to avoid Harry until he could talk to him at the end of the class.

As Harry and Hermione both bottled their completed and correct potions, Slughorn finally sauntered over to the two Gryffindors and with a slightly warmer smile said, "Ah Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger my two prized pupils according to Severus' notes. I see you both have completed the potion flawlessly." Slughorn's smile faltered

somewhat and he nervously fidgeted before he added, "I was wondering if the both of you would be interested in an invitation to my Slug club. It is a rather informal group and we meet twice a month on Friday evenings. I hope to see both of you there next Friday."

Harry smiled at Slughorn before he softly replied, "Professor, as you are aware we were taking a class called remedial potions with Professor Snape the same days as we have this class. We worked on many difficult potions over the course of that time and we thought we might try brewing Wolfsbane potion during that time this semester. If we agree to come to your club would you allow us to brew that potion during that period?"

Slughorn nodded eagerly and replied, "That would be most excellent. I look forward to seeing the both of you tonight."

The remainder of the day went quickly as Harry and Hermione were able to continue to avoid any contact with the inquisitorial squad and Umbridge. The following days led to revelations about several attacks under the auspices of the HPA until Thursday morning came about with the evening to hold the first DA meeting in a castle without the presence of Dumbledore as protection.

As Harry and Hermione sat eating breakfast they were joined by Neville and Susan as they discussed the latest assignments for classes and spoke in code about the night's DA meeting. Nearing the end of breakfast Draco Malfoy and his two oldest goons Crabbe and Goyle approached the table with matching smirks to their honored leader. Malfoy sneered at the group, "Well, well if it isn't Potty and his group of squibs and mudbloods. Actually, that's why I came over to visit Potter. I demand your mudblood kiss my boots and then maybe do some other things while on her knees."

Harry shook his head balefully at Draco before Hermione coolly replied, "Ferret boy I am immune from the ridiculous HPA because of my adopted status as a member of an old family. You may check ministry records if you don't believe me but I refuse to get on my knees for you now or ever. Any woman that finds herself in that position has my never ending sympathy."

Malfoy looked livid but before he could retort Harry calmly stood and offered his hand to Hermione and they left the three Slytherins gaping at how terribly their plan to put Potter's mudblood in her place.

The DA meeting had been held at the standard time before Astronomy in an attempt to shield the various students of the group from suspicion by the Umbridge sympathizers in the school. The entire group made their way in aside from Dean Thomas. Harry frowned upon seeing this well aware that Dean had been attacked earlier in the week. Harry then grew somewhat anxious when he realized the potential implications of what Dean's absence could mean.

Harry stood and glanced around the room before he started, "It appears as though one of our members has been detained or worse he has revealed our group's existence. I have placed detection wards up around the room the entire year in case we need them and thanks to my relationship with a few house elves we no longer need to worry about walking back to our common rooms after meetings. In fact, all we need to be able to do is get to the room undetected and we will succeed in keeping our secret until a time comes when we no longer need for it to be a secret."

Neville raised his hand and asked, "Christmas eve at Diagon Alley; that was the order wasn't it?"

Harry felt calm reassurance from Hermione in the back of his mind before he smiled and replied, "Yes it was Neville. By all accounts Voldemort was trying for a massacre but the order and some of its members stopped it. Due to Minister Fudge's actions he has become as dangerous as Voldemort has to our way of life."

A silence spread throughout the group until Luna broke it and said, "This doesn't surprise me, Minister Fudge has been infected by the snargles for years now and they are just becoming apparent now." Across the group incredulous looks were shared by everyone until they noticed that Luna was giggling. Of all the times Luna picked to be actually telling a joke, no one expected it then and that was what caused the longest laugh most of them had shared since the previous year.

Finally the laughs subsided and Harry spoke in a strained voice, "Thank you Luna, I think we all needed that. Tonight we are going to see if any of you are prepared to cast a corporeal patronus. If any of you are I will take you aside and give you the necessary additional training to be able to cast it all of the time. If none of you have made any progress then you will have to teach yourselves the charm because we can't afford any more time on it for the group."

The chest appeared and much to Harry's consternation no one new had made any real progress on their patronus and therefore when they finished Harry announced that no more patronus practices would be held for the group.

After patronus practice was finished Harry stood back and the room shifted into a vast warehouse with various boxes and objects throughout it. Everyone had perplexed looks on their faces before Harry smiled and said, "The remainder of the year I am going to be teaching all of you how to make use of an environment you are fighting in and to turn it to your advantage. Tonight I am going to observe each of you as you work your way alone through this obstacle. There will be virtual deatheaters and virtual dementors that will stalk you all in the maze. You can use anything short of unforgivables and I will monitor your progress and give each of you a critique and suggestions on how to improve in the future. Hermione you will be joining the rest of the group tonight and you will all begin when the timer sounds."

The timer sounded and for the next hour Harry watched everyone in the group battle their way through the challenge. Hermione was easily the best in the group but he was surprised to see Ron did much better when he had to stay a step ahead in order to succeed as he did when he played chess. While the power of his spells was woefully lacking and even Harry had to admit that Ron was easily the weakest wizard of the group but he did have an innate sense of tactics and resourcefulness that Harry intended on utilizing.

After he talked to everyone about what they needed to work on for the group he dismissed them and as he watched them stream from the room Hermione came up from behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist and placed her cheek against his back.

Harry turned around and with a sigh he said, "I've been working on the deatheater wards every chance I've gotten in public and I think we have to start everything over on it."

Hermione frowned and asked, "Why do we have to start over Harry? The calculations we made were perfect."

Harry nodded his agreement but then said, "That's true our calculations were perfect. But, we failed to take one important thing into consideration."

Hermione furrowed her brow and asked, "What did we forget Harry?"

Harry gave her a patient smile and replied, "We forgot to take into account all of the DA members who would have a similar sympathetic magic signature from the coins embedded on their bodies. I'm afraid it won't do us any good to install the current version of our ward because we will be ejected along with any deatheaters. As you can see in the end it wouldn't benefit the school much to lose both its antagonists and protectors because we installed a faulty ward. Unfortunately, starting over here at school will take awhile because it has been hard enough finishing our work here let alone starting from scratch. I imagine it will be until April before we can install the ward safely. I just wanted to tell you beforehand so you could prepare yourself for another couple of months dealing with Umbridge and her toadies." Hermione smiled and nodded before she took his hand and they left the room to work on the essay that had been assigned for History of Magic.

The remainder of the next week went by quietly as classes were rather fruitful and there hadn't been another attack on a DA member much to Harry's relief. The one problem with the secrecy oaths about the DA was that if they lost a member it was as if the time Harry spent training them had been wasted.

The time for the first Slug Club meeting had come and thanks to their deal with Slughorn they managed to get an enchanted pass from him that allowed them basically the same freedom of movement in the castle as when they were prefects. Harry's work on the ward increased in its intensity and he pushed his timetable forward a

couple of weeks on his toad ejection project much to Hermione's relief.

Harry dressed in the same dress robes he wore to for their anniversary as he patiently waited for Hermione down in the common room which was filled with other couples enjoying the quiet of the room as the fire flickered passively.

Hermione slowly came down the stairs in a lovely black dress that left her shoulders bare although she did have a wrap on her shoulders to help in the drafty castle. Harry beamed a smile at her, which she almost shyly returned, before she took his offered hand and gazed into his green eyes for a long moment as he did the same into her bright brown eyes. Finally, Harry snapped out of the trance and said, "I don't think I want to do anything other than dance with the most gorgeous witch in the world tonight. That is, if she doesn't mind being twirled around all night."

Hermione smiled and gave Harry a peck on the cheek before he led her down to Slughorn's quarters for the first Slug Club meeting of the year. Harry had contacted Sirius about what he knew about Slughorn and he indicated that the Slug Club was nothing more than Slughorn's masked attempts at gathering powerful young witches and wizards and making himself powerful allies and networks through which he could trade in favors occasionally.

Harry and Hermione reached the door to his quarters and knocked only to be greeted by Slughorn with a devilish smile before he said, "Ah excellent Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger. I see you have come together as your own dates. Very good, drinks are over in the left corner of the room and the feel free to talk to anyone while you are here."

Harry and Hermione entered the room and several eyes of the single people eagerly shifter towards them only to glance downwards and see their hands linked. While Harry and Hermione had been seriously dating for over a year there were still those in the castle that held out hope that it wasn't true. Harry snorted and rolled his eyes at the display and offered to grab some drinks while Hermione did some schmoozing around the room.

Hermione made her way over to talk to Cho Chang who had warmed up to Hermione since she had returned from the holidays. As Hermione and Cho discussed things that Harry really had no interest in he was pouring drinks in the corner but only after he checked the punch for any alcohol or potions. He was satisfied when he had finished searching and as he went to turn around he was cornered by Pansy Parkinson who for some reason wasn't on the arm of Draco Malfoy who appeared to be chatting up a different Slytherin girl that night.

Harry arched his eyebrow at the hungry look Pansy was shooting him. Little did Harry know that her parents were well aware of the wealth and influence Harry could exert if he was pushed in the proper direction. They had ordered her to break up with Draco which she gladly did and then ordered her to get in the good graces of Harry one way or the other to further their family's prestige by linking it with the Potter line.

Harry finally spoke as he was too startled to do anything but hold the punch glasses beforehand and said, "Um, Pansy what can I help you with?"

Pansy smiled sweetly before she rubbed up against Harry and said, "I was wondering if you'd like to dance with me tonight. I know I've been pretty awful to you in the past but I thought we could start over. I'd do *anything* to have us start back over at and become friends and maybe more."

Harry kept his expression guarded and could feel the mixture of anger and apprehension coming through his connection with Hermione. He finally decided that now was not the time to deal with Pansy so he gently said, "I am afraid that is not going to happen Pansy. Now if you'll excuse me I have to go dance with my date."

Harry made his way past Pansy and took a deep breath before he walked over to Hermione who was in an animated conversation with Cho about something. As he approached he heard, "I'm telling you Cho Puddlemere is going to win the cup this year. They have the best seeker in the league and if Wood makes it to their starting squad as keeper they'll be unstoppable."

Cho shook her head, not in anger but amusement, as she retorted, "I don't think so Hermione. I mean look at the chasers on the tornados and then you can't honestly tell me that you believe that. The tornados are easily the best team in the league." Harry realized then and there, that Hermione undoubtedly was the most perfect woman in the world. Even though she had repeatedly told Harry Quidditch was not the most interesting thing in the world to her, yet she had done the research and had even joined him in his love for Puddlemere United. He carefully kept his emotions in check so that Hermione wouldn't be able to surmise that he had heard their conversation before he finally continued forward from his obstructed position.

He slowly walked up to the girls who finally noticed his return from getting punch and they each shared glances before shifting the conversation to something appropriately girlish as Hermione concluded, "So you see Cho that's why Sleakeasy's is the best solution if you want to style your hair."

Harry smothered a grin and politely said, "Oh, hello Cho did you come alone tonight?"

Cho smiled and replied, "No Harry I did not. I came with Roger Davies, but he is currently using the loo. I should really get going, but it was a pleasure talking to you again Hermione. Harry, it is always a pleasure." Harry nodded slightly and Cho walked away from the pair before Harry handed Hermione her glass and she took a sip.

Harry sighed and said. "Pansy was hitting on me by the punch bowl. I definitely don't like how quickly she has dropped Malfoy and moved on to me. I imagine she must have some ulterior motive for her actions, and most likely they are fueled by power and money."

Hermione nodded taking a sip of her punch before she said, "I imagine that is exactly what she is after. But, as long as we keep on these rings the headmaster gave us then we will be immune to any outside controlling factors."

Harry nodded before he grinned slightly and teased, "Hermione love, I know we never talk about this much but can I ask you a personal question?"

Hermione was slightly startled by Harry's question but nodded because they had a very honest relationship. Harry smiled warmly at her and playfully asked, "What is your favorite Quidditch team?"

Hermione gaped for a moment before realizing that Harry had overheard her conversation with Cho, so she decided to rise up and take the bait. She replied, "Oh I think the Chudley Canons are the best team by far. In fact, I doubt I can date someone who cheers for someone other than the Canons. Actually, Ron and I were talking about that very topic yesterday."

Harry frowned and Hermione realized she might have taken her teasing a bit too far so she added, "Of course as you well know my favorite team is Puddlemere love. I was just having you on."

Harry's frown dissipated some but he still wasn't smiling when he said, "I'm sorry if you think teasing me about dating other boys isn't exactly my idea of funny love."

Hermione shook her head and gave Harry a deep kiss which was well beyond the bounds for acceptable behavior in public but she needed Harry to know what her true feelings were so she could nip the sullen Harry in the bud.

She broke the kiss and looked into Harry's eyes. They were the best barometer for how Harry was feeling because their link was flooded with too many emotions at the moment to have any accurate idea what he was feeling. His eyes were slightly glazed but still held a little hurt in them. They also held a deep love for her and she decided not to tease Harry about dating other boys any time soon. She rationalized it probably had to do with Harry growing up without love and feeling panicked whenever he felt as though it might be taken away.

She grasped Harry's hand and led him to the dance floor where they swayed to the music. Tonight wasn't the time to worry about getting their steps right. In fact, it was a time for Hermione to hold Harry close because she suddenly became aware that while it hadn't been intentional on either of their parts they really hadn't had much time to be alone together since they returned from the break.

Hermione gripped Harry tightly as they danced and she was secretly glad they had a Hogsmeade weekend ahead so that they could share some alone time together. The previous week had been good at least for the year's standards anyways, but Hermione realized she needed to remind Harry that better times were ahead.

A/N: Please Review and tell me what you think of the story so far.

This chapter was an important bridge to the next couple of chapters in which we'll go along for a ride in a staff meeting to catch some of Umbridge's secret motives and also the Hogsmeade trip with Harry and Hermione. Don't think we've heard the last from Pansy and this is all before the dance when the crap will hit the fan and someone will be expelled from the school for good. Keep reading and keep up the great reviews.

Chapter 37

Saturday morning, the first Hogsmeade weekend in January Harry awoke from a very strange dream about an orphanage and several children laughing at him. Harry sprang up off of his bed with a scream and once again he was thankful that he had placed silencing charms around his bed. Harry shook his head and then got out of the bed and threw on his workout clothes.

After a relaxing workout in the room of requirement Harry took a bath in the Gryffindor Prefects bathroom which still functioned for the former Prefects of the school. After he got out of the shower he returned to the common room to find it still empty which was unusual because Hermione was usually up at that point.

Harry sighed looking around the empty room and summoned his bag that still had his notes for the deatheater ward. After working on his notes for nearly an hour and getting a fair amount of work done on creating the ward he was finally graced by the presence of Hermione. She was wearing a tight sweater and jeans and she watched as Harry's eyes went rather wide when she sauntered over to him and sat on his lap.

She giggled at the gob smacked expression on his face before she gave him a quick peck on the lips and said, "Harry, I wanted to apologize about teasing you last night. I sometimes forget that you didn't grow up like I did and my parents always spoke like that to each other. I want you to know I have no plans on going anywhere now or anytime ever. So we are stuck with each other ok, love?"

Harry smiled slightly and nodded before he replied, "I know that, but sometimes it's hard to accept that someone I love won't be taken from me like my parents. I know it's not rational but its still how I feel."

Hermione nodded and gave him a kiss on the lips before she said, "Today we are going to be a normal couple Harry. We are going to go shopping and then go to Madam Puddifoot's for some tea and to talk and maybe kiss. We've spent a lot of time together since we've returned to the school but not much as a couple and we need to make time for that too ok?" Harry nodded and Hermione smiled and

added, "Why don't we go downstairs and grab some breakfast and talk about Quidditch?"

After a quiet breakfast spent talking about nothing in particular they found themselves on the carriages heading towards Hogsmeade for the quiet day ahead.

As the majority of the students in the school were going to Hogsmeade the staff was holding a meeting called by Umbridge to discuss the start of classes since the holidays.

Umbridge stood at attention in the small lounge for staff that Umbridge had instituted shortly after her appointment as head of the school following Dumbledore's departure.

The squat toadish woman finally spoke, "I've called today's staff meeting to discuss the general status of the student populace and also to speak on the relative success of the application of the HPA within the walls of the school."

Professor Slughorn stood and said, "I can understand the need to implement ministry edict within the school, but I believe some of your inquisitorial squad might be taking their application a bit far. One of my best students Ms. Granger has been harassed on several occasions outside of class, simply because she is a muggleborn student. I would hope that we would encourage our more talented students to showcase their talents and not fear of being persecuted because there are other jealous factions within the student populace."

Umbridge shook her head distastefully and replied, "Horace you simply don't understand the awful effect on our society that half breeds and muggleborns have on our heritage and traditions do you? Mark my words soon enough wizards will be working with muggles and then everything we have fought to keep secret and sacred for so long. That is why abominations such as Ms. Granger need to be taught their role in society so they don't get any crazy ideas like being minister of magic or even working for the ministry."

Professor Vector shook her head and spoke, "Delores, I fail to see why you want to persecute some of the most talented students in our school. Ms. Granger is the most brilliant student I have had the

pleasure of teaching in Arithmancy and by proxy she taught the second most brilliant student I have in Mr. Potter. In fact Mr. Potter's mother was a muggleborn like Ms. Granger, and I have no doubt that both Ms. Granger and Mr. Potter could be professors in just about any subject we offer; isn't that correct Minerva?" Professor McGonagall merely nodded with a small smile gracing her face content to listen to the rest of the staff have the same argument with Umbridge that she had fought the entire year."

Umbridge was quickly becoming indignant and weakly argued, "Muggleborn students may be competent in such theoretical subjects as potions, runes, and Arithmancy. But, no one here can argue that purebloods are the most magically powerful students. If you say otherwise you are simply ignoring the facts."

McGonagall took the opportunity to voice her opinions, "Delores, Albus, V-Voldemort, and Harry are all half bloods and they are easily the most powerful witch or wizards alive. In fact the two most powerful students in the school are Ms. Granger and Mr. Potter and neither is a pureblood."

Umbridge sneered and huffed, "Potter may be the most powerful wizard in the school, but that is because he comes from an old family. Granger will be dealt with if she keeps becoming the topic of attention here today." The rest of the staff stifled their retorts not wanting Hermione to pay for being the subject of their praise in Umbridge's presence.

Umbridge was finally content with the talk of her least favorite mudblood coming to a close so she pushed on in the meeting, "Another topic that we must discuss today are the upcoming OWL and NEWT exams for our fifth and seventh year students. Are the students progressing in their studies?"

The professors all shared a look surprised that Umbridge even cared before Professor Flitwick spoke, "Delores the only concerns I have are that I have one student taking ten OWL exams and I am not sure if there will be any time conflicts."

Professor McGonagall sighed and added, "Yes I also have two students taking ten or more exams. But, as I recall from when Percy

Weasley was a student here, not a single exam falls during the time of another exam. I do not believe Mr. Stern should have any issues because he is doing quite well in my class.” Professor Flitwick smiled and nodded content with the knowledge.

Umbridge looked around the room for any more comments before she continued, “Additionally, the fifth year students will be given career counseling by their respective heads of house. I have taken the liberty of making up a list of all of your muggleborn students with suggestions for proper career suggestions. I expect you all to deal with matter properly.” With that the staff meeting was dismissed with each of Hermione’s professors intent on not allowing Umbridge to do anything to one of their favorite students.

Meanwhile, in Hogsmeade, Harry and Hermione were preparing to enter Scrivenshaft’s to start their day of peace and quiet together. Harry was searching through the quills to pick up looking for the golden eagle feather quills he had grown accustomed to when he chanced a look out the window and spotted Pansy Parkinson looking directly at him.

Harry turned away from Pansy and rolled his eyes; content with his find, before he walked over to Hermione who was looking for the black falcon feather quills she had grown accustomed to using. Harry smiled when she found her quills and beamed with happiness before Harry said, “Don’t look out the window love. Pansy was giving me cow eyes while I was shopping and I glanced out the window and saw her. Honestly it was a bit scary.”

Hermione giggled and grabbed Harry’s hand leading him to the front so that they could buy their quills and move on to Hermione’s favorite place in the village at the bookstore. Hermione dragged Harry out of Scrivenshaft’s and down the main street to the bookstore to do some serious book shopping.

When they entered the book store they were surprised to find Mathias and Luna doing some shopping as well and they both waved when Harry and Hermione entered the store. Luna motioned for them to come over, before she asked, “Are you both avoiding the Peruvian Ear weevils like Mathias and I are?”

Harry smiled and winked at Mathias before he said, "No, we are just enjoying the quiet of the book store. To tell you the truth, we are usually the only ones who stop here on Hogsmeade weekends. It is always nice to have some company though."

Hermione nodded and added, "Yes, and we haven't had much time to talk aside from the DA since the holidays. I'm surprised neither of you were invited to the first slug club meeting."

Luna smiled and replied, "Oh we both were invited, but we got caught up in a broom closet on the way to it."

Harry chuckled as Mathias' face flushed with embarrassment before he tried to regain some of his dignity and added, "Yes we were love." Which prompted Harry to break out laughing and Hermione joined in as they leaned against each other trying to regain their breath as they held their sides.

After they stopped laughing because the owner of the book store gave the both of them a rather harsh look, they said their goodbyes and began their decent into the reaches of the building. Harry was looking a book on advanced jinxes and hexes while Hermione found a fascinating book on the theory of spell creation by using Arithmancy.

Harry had decided to purchase the first book when he happened upon a book on sword fighting, and he decided that he could incorporate dueling against an opponent the room provided to improve his skills before the summer.

Hermione hadn't found any other books she wanted after she browsed for about an hour and after she excitedly checked what Harry had purchased she grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him down the street to Madam Puddifoot's so she could get some snogging time in with her boyfriend.

They entered Madam Puddifoot's for the second time together; although this time they certainly had designs on making their stay much more romantic and much more enjoyable. Hermione giggled as she led Harry into the small restaurant/café and they were both blissfully unaware that Pansy Parkinson watched them enter with a scowl.

Pansy muttered to herself, "I don't see what he finds so special about the bookworm mudblood. I doubt she does more than snog him and it's not like she is all that much to look at. I'll just have to show him what a mistake he is making and I can do that by forcing him to break up with the filthy little mudblood to begin with." Pansy took a quick look around before she stomped towards Madam Puddifoot's with conquest on her mind.

Harry and Hermione found a secluded table in the corner and took up residency as Harry helped Hermione into her seat and then slid his next to hers so they could cuddle while they talked.

Harry ordered a cup of chamomile while Hermione got a cup of earl grey as he said, "Ok Hermione, are you having fun today?"

Hermione beamed Harry a smile and leant over before she gave him a kiss. The kiss quickly became a full blown snog as Hermione slipped her tongue into Harry's lip before he opened his mouth and released his tongue also. Sensations swirled in each of their brains as Hermione tasted the minty flavor of Harry's mouth and Harry tasted the flavor of strawberries and crème that he had grown so fond of after he realized that Hermione used that flavor of toothpaste.

When they finally broke the kiss they were both spotting slightly crooked but wide grins. Harry finally said, "Well, that was quite lovely I must say." Hermione giggled and gave Harry a kiss on the tip of his nose before she snuggled into his shoulder and grabbed her cup of tea to do some sipping. As they sat their Harry asked something that caught Hermione slightly off guard when he asked, "Hermione, what is the color of the dress you'll be wearing at the ball?"

Hermione frowned slightly and replied, "I kind of wanted it to be a surprise Harry. Why do you ask?"

Harry smiled and said, "I don't need to see the dress it's just that if I knew what color your dress was I'd be able to make your surprise match your dress."

Hermione nodded slowly and replied, "It's emerald green Harry. But there had better be no peaking before the ball mister." She finished in her best McGonagall impersonation which caused Harry to laugh and

kiss the top of her head which she had expertly tucked under his chin as they continued to talk.

Harry finally wrapped his arm around Hermione and they just sat in silence for a few wonderful minutes. Little did they know that Pansy had watched the entire exchange, and was growing more and more enraged as she watched from the outside the front window of the restaurant suddenly becoming intent on breaking the couple up now instead of later as she had planned. Pansy stomped into Madam Puddifoot's not exactly in her right mind and the only thing on said mind was vengeance.

Harry and Hermione's idealistic day suddenly came crashing down when they heard Pansy scream from across the room, "HARRY POTTER I ORDER YOU UNDER THE HPA TO BREAK UP WITH THE BOOKWORM MUDBLOOD AND COME TO ME WHERE YOU BELONG." Harry glanced at Hermione whose smile had suddenly turned into a scowl before he sighed and turned towards the sound of the disruption.

Pansy finally stalked her way across Madam Puddifoot's to find Harry and Hermione watching her with no small amount of distaste. She finally worked up the remainder of her limited courage reserves and said, "So, what is it going to be Pot-Harry?"

Harry's face betrayed no emotion although Hermione knew he was feeling quite smug thanks to their connection. He tightened his grip around her shoulders before he replied, "Pansy, the Potter family is much older than the supposed *grand pureblood families* that exist today. My ancestors were contemporaries of the founders and I highly doubt the Parkinson family was little more than a muggle name at the time. So, tell me Pansy what exactly is the point of having titles like pureblood if they aren't even accurate?"

Pansy obviously was taken quite off kilter by Harry's statement and could only think to say, "You don't know what you're talking about Potter. In fact, I don't even know what I saw in you in the first place. All you are is a mudblood lover with no sense of history." Pansy spun around on her heel and stomped out of Madam Puddifoot's considerably quieter than when she had entered.

Harry shared a look with Hermione before they both broke off into laughter and Hermione leaned up and whispered into Harry's ear, "It's a good thing you didn't tell her that you are related to one of the founders or her head might have exploded." Harry gave Hermione a kiss on the forehead and then chuckled into Hermione's neck which caused her to shiver from his hot breath on her neck.

He finally pulled away while still holding her in his arms and said, "I think we need to talk about some things and put them to bed." Hermione nodded confusedly at the strange statement but she was also curious as to what things needed to be dealt with.

Harry smiled and began, "Well first I wanted to talk to you about the work on the deatheater wards."

Hermione nodded and asked, "More good news I hope?"

Harry gave her a small smile and replied, "Well, yes and no I think. I should be finished with the spell creation for the ward before the dance. But, I thought that it would be good to wait for a very symbolic day to clean the castle. A form of spring cleaning, if you will."

Hermione arched her eyebrow and asked, "How long are we talking about Harry?"

Harry gave her a soft smile and then pulled back a little afraid of her reaction when he said, "I was thinking we could make a statement by kicking her and any other deatheaters out of the school on April's Fool Day."

Harry watched Hermione carefully before she laughed and said, "I'm sure we can manage a little bit longer to evict her from the castle because I agree that it will give us the ultimate last word." Harry nodded somewhat less hesitantly before he gave her a peck on the lips and they shifted back to their cuddling position.

They sat in the same position for a while just content to be holding each other and drinking their tea before Harry sighed and said, "We also need to talk about Slughorn and just how much we can get from him without really giving anything of importance up."

Hermione nodded and then a thoughtful expression crossed her face as she said, "Well Harry, I say we allow him to think he has us fully in his little slug club and use him like he has become so accustomed to doing to others."

Harry nodded and then asked, "How exactly are we supposed to do that love?"

Hermione shook her head with mirth and replied, "Harry as good as you are at getting revenge I would think the concept would be simple to you." At Harry's confused expression Hermione giggled quietly and then continued, "We continue to accept his praise in class and pretend we are confiding in him during our remedial classes. After all that is how he creates his network he trades information through the web of contacts he makes. We attend his slug club parties and play his little game of gathering information while he drink punch and if what Remus told me is correct, he will serve butterbeer and firewhiskey as the parties progress. He'll be teaching us potions for the next couple of years so we'll need to keep up the game until we graduate and when he asks for his first favor we'll simply tell him that he can sod off."

Harry chuckled and replied, "How very Slytherin of you my dear. Of course you will be the one to tell him to sod off when the time comes. I'll want to be watching it so I can have a vivid memory for my pensieve that we can show the kids when we get old enough." Hermione gave Harry a sly smile and burrowed her head into his shoulder and cooed contentedly at Harry's proclamation of children. It was a promise of a future she wanted badly and she was pleased to see Harry taking such an interest and hopeful look into the future when so many terrible things were still to come.

Finally, Harry broke the comfortable silence once again with a topic that he had been juggling with for over a year and he had yet to find the closure he desperately wanted. He started, "Hermione, I've been agonizing over how I should deal with Ron and Ginny. Do you have any ideas?"

Hermione stiffened slightly before she replied, "Ron has seemed to flourish this year without us around to keep him fettered with any

ideas of responsibility. I mean he isn't going to set any records on his OWL exams but he probably won't do the worst either. I mean I'm sure he can scrape by with more OWL's than Crabbe and Goyle." Hermione sighed and added, "I think we just need to keep our eyes and ears open in relation to Ginny. This year is forcing her to grow up quickly and it will be interesting to see where that leaves her."

Harry laughed and retorted, "Yes I understand all of that Hermione. But, should we trust Ron with more important things in the DA or should we leave him to his own devices. I mean he is easily magically the weakest member of the group but tactically he has an innate sense. In the last drill I ran he was unbelievably inventive in his use of the environment. Much more inventive then you were or I would have been. I just feel like he deserves to be utilized in a way."

Hermione nodded in understanding before she took on a thoughtful look that Harry had grown to know in the past year. It was the same look she had before she came up with a particularly brilliant situation and Harry patiently awaited her response. Finally, her bright brown eyes lit up and she replied, "I think we should ask the room to create some battle scenarios for Ron on paper and see how he solves them. We can use them as ideas for future training exercises and we'll be utilizing Ron to his maximum potential for the DA."

Harry scratched his chin as though he was thinking deeply about what Hermione had said before he smiled and said, "Well love, I think that just earned one free snog point that you can redeem at any time for a snog from me." Hermione giggled and she tightened her grip on Harry.

Finally, she started to talk and she said, "Harry I know you want closure on Ron as being your first and best friend for so long so I think I might have an idea that will put that Ron to rest and allow you to accept the friend Ron is to you now."

Harry nibbled on Hermione's ear lobe as she shivered with the sensations it caused before he whispered in her ear, "I'm listening love. What is this grand idea you have for me?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Why don't we share our favorite Ron memories and then leave him right there. In our memories so that

way he'll never be forgotten but we can finally leave him behind us and try to support the Ron we know now as someone different; because truthfully he is someone different."

Harry nodded slowly already thinking of his favorite memories with Ron before he asked, "Would you like to go first or should I?"

Hermione smiled pleased Harry seemed so accepting of the idea and said, "I think you should go first Harry. I know you need this more than I do."

Harry sighed and nodded trying to think of his favorite Ron memory and then it came to him. He smiled and said, "I guess it would have to be the summer before second year. The Dursley's had finally freed me from the cupboard and gave me ickle Dudders second room. Unfortunately they also barred my windows and locked me in my room with my food coming in through a cat flap they had installed on my door." Harry smiled faintly as Hermione scowled as she chalked up another reason to pay the Dursley's a visit sooner than later. Harry continued, "Then about three days before we were supposed to take the express Ron and the twins came in their dads flying car and pulled the bars of the window and they broke me out of hell. I had wondered if everyone had forgotten about me because I hadn't received any letters of course that was because Dobby didn't want me to return to Hogwarts that year."

Harry paused and was unsurprised when Dobby arrived with a soft pop and asked hopefully, "Master Harry is wanting something from Dobby?"

Harry smiled and replied, "No Dobby that's not necessary, I'm just telling Hermione about second year when you withheld my mail from my friends." Dobby bowed his head in shame and Harry added, "You helped save my life that year without even realizing it Dobby. If not for you I never would have known trouble was coming in the school and it probably would have been too late to stop Tom and his basilisk. I just wanted to say thank you Dobby and I consider you friend." Dobby beamed and Harry finished, "I didn't mean to call you here so you can go back and bug Sirius for me if you'd like?" Dobby nodded and

vanished once again with a soft pop. Harry glanced at Hermione who was sporting a rather silly grin.

Harry chuckled and continued, "So Ron rescued me and they took me to see the burrow for the first time. I have to admit despite going to Hogwarts that first year; I'd never really seen the magical world outside of Diagon Alley and the castle. It was so amazing to watch the dishes clean themselves and hear the ghoul making a racket up in the attic. I don't think I'd ever seen Ron as relaxed as he was then. It was before things started to get really dangerous and he was in his element at the house he grew up in. I doubt he'll ever realize how jealous I was off him at that moment. In fact, I doubt he'd be able to realize how it almost felt to me like he was rubbing it in my face that he had such a normal life growing up while the barred up room they pulled me from was the best accommodations I'd ever had in 11 years with the Dursleys." Harry took a deep breath as his thoughts strayed and he continued, "I'm going to skip past my FLOO incident and the ever egotistical crush of yours and move on to how Ron and I got stuck at the station."

Hermione scowled and asked, "Are you ever going to let me live that down?"

Harry smiled and replied, "No I really doubt I let you live down your first crush because I doubt you'll ever let me live down that horrid Cho Chang crush I had at the beginning of fourth year." Hermione nodded as though pleased with the trade off and Harry continued, "Ron suggested we get in the car and fly it to Hogwarts. Of course we were both terrified that if we didn't make it to the school on time that we'd be denied admission or something silly like that. I guess flying in that car will always stick with me as my favorite Ron moment because we were so deep in it that all we could think to do was laugh most of the trip about how ridiculous our situation was. I guess that's how I'll always remember Ron my best friend." Harry finished somewhat fondly and also somewhat sadly as Hermione took her hand and caressed his cheek before she gave him a peck on the lips.

Once she was satisfied he had finished his moment she said, "I think my favorite memory of Ron was also one of my least favorite memories of you Harry." Harry frowned and she explained, "It was

after Dumbledore had found you and placed you in the hospital wing following your confrontation with Quirrel and Voldemort. Ron was so worried about you even though he had been hurt in that chess game. I think it was the first time he realized just how dangerous it was to be Harry Potter and he actually had a moment of conscience as I sat there next to you holding your hand for the first time. Of course I never would have admitted it to you back then. Ron looked at me and how I was holding your hand and he said, 'I hope Harry realizes how much you care for him because I think he deserves a little love in his life.' Of course I was mortified because while I did love you, the way he described it made me think of you in a way I wasn't exactly comfortable with at that time."

Harry arched his eyebrow and Hermione smiled and continued, "I admit he did have me thinking about how I felt about the both of you for the next couple of years. It may have taken me two more years before I realized he was right, but he was the one who actually started me thinking about it. In a way he is partially to thank for getting us together, because I very well may never have thought about us like that until sometime like now. I bet by that time you would have already had Cho wrapped around your finger and I would have been forced to be the good friend who also happened to be a girl and give you advice even though my heart protested against it. Anyways, that was my favorite Ron moment and actually as the years continued we had less good moments and more fights than I'd like to remember. Unfortunately, you were placed right in between us most of those times and it wasn't even your fault. I'm just glad we survived everything because I'm sure it made us stronger."

Harry smiled and he said, "I think that is an apt description for us, don't you think? Although I am going to change it a little, to better serve our purposes. Our motto for the rest of the year will be, 'It won't kill us, but it will make us stronger.'"

Hermione smiled and said, "Better to be a strong survivor right love?" Harry nodded slowly and then gave her a kiss on the lips conveying exactly how he felt about her. By the end of the war they would each have their share of scars that much they knew. But, they also knew that they would be able to deal with those scars together and alive.

A/N: Please review. This chapter was my attempt to put Harry and Hermione's plans for the rest of the year into focus. Next chapter is the ball and I guarantee a few surprises and the expulsion of a student with some blood mixed in for all of you gore lovers. Keep reading and keep up the great reviews.

Chapter 38

The days following the Hogsmeade weekend were relatively quiet around Hogwarts with little or no noise from the Slytherin sect as they plotted to gain revenge for having their proverbial arses handed to them on a platter with the HPA by Harry and Hermione.

Classes continued to go by rather swimmingly including the implementation of project use the slug as Harry and Hermione would share seemingly important tidbits about their personal lives that in truth had no truth whatsoever.

Finally, Valentine's Day came and the ball was to be held at night after they had morning classes. The afternoon was to be excused so that the females of the Hogwarts population could properly prepare for what was going to be a very important night in their short lives. Fortunately, it fell on a Friday and Harry and Hermione had no classes to attend so Hermione informed Harry they would be studying that morning to work ahead on their classes a little.

As they sat eating breakfast in the great hall Harry looked over at Hermione and asked, "So mistress, what is your bidding this morning?" Harry had taken to calling Hermione his mistress because she had the same mentality about homework that a dominatrix might have in less reputable pursuits.

Hermione scrunched her nose up at the statement even though Harry could tell his nickname for her at the very least, amused the witch sitting next to him before she said, "I imagine you need to work on some History of Magic, especially if you plan on napping the next couple of weeks. I need to begin my review for my OWL in muggle studies since you refused to join me in taking it."

Harry chuckled and replied, "Sorry love, but ten classes, a prefectship for at least half of the term, and Quidditch kind of forced my hands on that one." Hermione nodded reluctantly even though Harry could tell through their link that she was more than pleased that he was taking as many OWL's as he was.

After breakfast Hermione ushered Harry up to the library and forced him to sit down as he paged his way through the necessary assignments and readings for History of Magic through the end of March.

As Harry wrote another essay about the Goblin Rebellions he was beginning to understand what a heavyweight boxer who had just gone the distance felt like after a bout. After he finished his last essay for the class he pinched the bridge of his nose before he glanced over at Hermione who was engrossed in her muggle studies review and appeared to have no inclination to take a break for lunch.

Finally, Harry gently brushed her cheek with his fingers and she glanced up with a smile on her face before she stretched her legs and arched her back softly popping it and she asked, "Are you all done Harry?"

Harry yawned and nodded before he glanced at his watch and then switched to check on the status of everyone he had put on his watch. Everyone was in the safety of their home or in the Hogwarts library. He smiled and replied, "It's time for lunch if you are all done here. Of course I'm sure you'll want some time to get ready for the ball, so why don't we call it quits on studying for the rest of the day? Katie has a long practice scheduled for tomorrow now that we only have a month until the match for the Quidditch cup, and I doubt I'll be up for much studying after I freeze outside all afternoon."

Hermione smiled and placed all of her books and notes back into her bag as Harry did the same standing and stretching his somewhat gangly frame out. Hermione grabbed Harry's hand and led him back down to the great hall for some time alone before she spent the next several hours getting ready for the ball.

As they sat in the hall Harry glanced around and smirked when he saw how all of the girls were all nearly crouched in a position to leave the hall in a dead sprint to get prepared for the ball. Harry looked over at Hermione who had an anxious smile playing on her lips before he asked, "What is it that you girls do during all of the time that you need to get ready for the ball?"

Hermione gave Harry a mysterious smile and she did a good job of muffling their link before she answered, "Oh you know Harry, girl stuff."

Harry frowned and then said, "So you really aren't going to tell me are you?"

Hermione smiled and gave a kiss on the lips and said, "Every couple needs to keep a little mystery in their relationship or things get stale love."

Harry pulled out the puppy dog eyes and replied, "But I don't think I'll ever get bored from you mystery or not."

Hermione giggled and said, "Most of the time Harry, those puppy dog eyes would have me answering any question you wanted me to. But, this is just one of those things better left unknown. Trust me love you will appreciate the end result." Harry sighed and nodded with a small smile even though Hermione could tell he was a little disappointed about her not telling him, she could also tell he was anxious to see what she looked like in her dress even more. As they stood to go back to the common room Hermione gave Harry a peck on the lips and looked him in the eye mentally conveying that *she was sorry she couldn't tell Harry why it took girls so long, because then her membership in the sisterhood would be revoked.* That brought about a genuine smile from Harry which was exactly what she was going for.

When they reached the common room she gave Harry one last parting kiss and glanced at her watch before she said, "I'll be down at 7:30 sharp so be ready ok Harry?" Harry nodded and she nearly pranced up the stairs to the girls' dorm as Harry took a seat and pulled out his notes for the deatheater wards as he was making some of his final calculations. Eventually Ron and Neville took up residence over at the chess board and Harry watched from his chair as Ron repeatedly pummeled Neville's pieces until they refused to play anymore for Neville and went on strike.

Ron looked around the room for his next victim and his eyes came upon Harry and with a small smile he asked, "Harry, mate want to give it a go for old time's sake?"

Harry smiled and nodded actually somewhat anxious to see how he would fare playing Ron in chess, for the first time in over a year. As the board set itself up Ron asked, "So how are you doing mate?"

Harry sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose before he smiled and replied, "Well putting aside from Umbridge, Voldemort, Pansy Parkinson's strange obsession with me, your sister's use of an unforgivable on my girlfriend because she had a childish crush, and that Malfoy and his cronies have tried three or four times this year to kill me. Other than those, I'd say I am just dandy."

Ron paled a little bit before he let out a weak chuckle and said, "Rough year eh?"

Harry couldn't help but laugh and he replied, "Yeah Ron something like that. If it wasn't for Hermione I think I'd have made a run for it a while ago."

Ron smiled and said, "You know mate, for the longest time I thought I had a crush on Hermione. But, now that I see how she is around you, I can see that I never really got her you know? But you seem to understand her in ways I never would have guessed."

Harry smiled and said, "Thanks mate that means a lot to hear that. I think I can say the same for you and Lavender. You both seem to be getting along quite well." Ron smiled and nodded as he moved a pawn to open the match.

As Harry moved his own pawn to open up his portion of the match Ron casually asked, "So Harry, how far have you gotten with Hermione?"

Harry arched his eyebrow and replied, "I don't really think that is any of your business mate."

Ron smirked and replied as he moved another pawn, "Oh come off it Harry. How do you think guys know how to do anything with girls? We share information and then we know how to make them happy."

Harry shook his head as he moved his knight away from the back of the board and he finally said, "That might be Ron, but I think

Hermione and I will just continue on the way we have been. I might not be as smart as Hermione but I'm smart enough not to ruin a good thing when I have it." Ron shrugged his shoulders as they spent the rest of the game talking about Quidditch.

When Harry put Ron in checkmate he looked at his friend who had an incredulous and almost angry expression on his face before he blurted, "Bloody hell Harry. When did you learn how to play chess mate?"

Harry smiled and replied, "I've been working on my strategic skills a bit the last year." Harry frowned and added, "Of course you'd know that if you hadn't been such a prat last year."

Ron frowned and with a sad expression said, "Harry, I doubt I can apologize enough about last year. I was a prat and I really don't have an excuse. I've looked back at everything I did the last few years to both you and Hermione and I realize that I wasn't a very good friend. If this year has taught me anything it is exactly how special both you and Hermione are and how badly I messed up things with the both of you."

Harry sighed and nodded before he finally spoke softly as he said, "Ron, Hermione and I will be there for you in the future but we'll never have what we had in the past. If you can understand that then we won't have any problems. Consider this the best we can give you now or any time in the future. I hope you can understand that."

Ron actually smiled and replied, "I think that would be great Harry. But, Lavender and Hermione will have kittens if we don't start getting ready for the ball right now so how about we doll ourselves up." Harry chuckled and they grabbed Neville before they headed up to the dorms to get ready for the ball.

As Harry finished putting on his nicest set of dress robes he decided against wearing his dragonhide vest for the evening because he wanted to be comfortable as he danced with Hermione. He did grab both of his wands and put them in his wrist and thigh holsters before he styled his hair like he knew Hermione liked. He put a dab of some cologne on before he grabbed the small jewelry box with Hermione's

surprise inside of it and made his way down to the common room by seven.

Harry watched as Neville headed off to pick up Susan and he watched as many of the younger and older Gryffindor girls made their way down to their dates. He also noticed how many of those same girls looked at Harry longingly before taking their dates arms almost reluctantly.

Finally, at 7:30 sharp Hermione slowly made her way down the stairs in a lovely green strapless gown that showed off a little bit of cleavage but was rather form fitting like her gown from the previous year. Her hair which had grown less bushy and curlier this year was pulled back into a pony tail and she wore the faintest amount of makeup on her face.

Hermione smiled when she spotted Harry who was wearing his nicest set of dress robes with the Potter family crest on the breast. His robes were black with emerald green trim and he wore a white shirt underneath his robes. Harry smiled as she came down the stairs and offered her his hand as she reached the bottom step and helped her to the floor before he said, "If it is possible to improve on perfection even for a short while, I'd say you achieved it tonight my love."

Hermione smiled and replied, "Thank you Harry. You look quite beautiful too."

Harry chuckled and then quietly almost breathlessly asked, "Can I give you your surprise now or do you want it later?"

Hermione smiled and said, "Right now would be lovely Harry."

Harry smiled and manufactured the jewelry box from his robes and opened it with a click to reveal a beautiful golden necklace with a flawless emerald hanging from the center of it. Hermione gasped as Harry smiled and said, "Now you can see why I wanted to know the color of your robes. Fortunately, I had pretty much every possible color covered with the various necklaces in the Potter ancestral vault." Hermione smiled and pulled her hair up so Harry could put the necklace on before he kissed her on the neck and said, "Well my love, ready to brave the masses and cut a mean rug with me?"

Hermione giggled and they made their way to the great hall unaware of the plot that had been hatched to bring about the demise of the couple at the dance.

Harry and Hermione reached the great hall and entered to find most couples had already found their seats so Harry and Hermione took the seats that their friends had saved them before Umbridge had the staff usher the rest of the couples into their seats.

When everyone was seated Umbridge said, "Hem, hem tonight's ball is a privilege and I expect all of you. Even those of you who might be a little less refined..." Umbridge looked directly at Hermione before she paled at the sight of the distinctive necklace on her neck and glanced elsewhere as Hermione sported a large smirk on her face. Umbridge continued, "On your best behavior for the entirety of the night's proceedings. The entertainment for the night will be provided by *The Wicked Witches*. After dinner the ceremonial opening dance will be led by the leaders of the inquisitorial squad Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson and their dates. Thank you and that is all."

After they had a small dinner they watched as Draco and his date a sixth year Slytherin girl who looked familiar but they didn't know actually danced rather well while Pansy and her date struggled around on the dance floor.

When they finished Harry stood and quietly asked, "Hermione, would you grace me with this dance?"

Hermione smiled prettily and replied, "I would be delighted Harry my love."

As Harry and Hermione danced, Hermione placed her head on Harry's chest and they each closed their eyes as they moved to the music. Had they opened their eyes they would have seen Draco Malfoy and Theodore Nott lining up their wands on each of their backs.

Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up and he opened his eyes to see Nott's wand aimed at Hermione's back and watched with horror and Nott cast a cutting hex at Hermione's back. Harry threw up a wandless shield and spun Hermione slightly letting his

hand fall off of Hermione's waist. Hermione opened her eyes questioningly at Harry before she watched Malfoy cast a spell from close range as Harry was looking in the opposite direction. She threw up a shield quickly but it was a moment too late as Malfoy's cutting hex hit Harry's arm just above the elbow and cut his left arm cleanly off leaving a bloody stub where the arm that had held her earlier when they danced had been violently ripped from.

Hermione gasped as Harry dazedly slipped to the floor holding the bleeding stub of his arm in puzzlement and horror. Hermione watched Malfoy raise his wand again and Hermione pulled out her wand and with a flick of her wand she sent Malfoy flying into the wall where he landed in an unconscious heap.

While the carnage unfolded a few members of the DA formed around Hermione as Mathias dispatched of Nott and bound him in ropes. The staff was scrambling to the commotion and none had seen the attack thanks to Umbridge arranging it in advance with her. Luna calmly grabbed Harry's arm and conjured a small pail of ice that she placed it in.

Hermione was babbling but easily more coherent than Harry who still grasped at his arm as it spurted blood. Professor McGonagall reached the group first and gasped as she saw Harry holding his stump and Hermione slumped next to him in shock as she was soaked in Harry's blood. Doing the only thing she could she summoned a house elf to take Harry to Madam Pomfrey as she rounded up Hermione and anyone else who would go to the hospital wing to get Harry's arm reattached and hopefully save his life before it was too late.

Harry arrived in the hospital wing as the little house elf called for Madam Pomfrey. She came out of her office and gasped as she took in how pale Harry looked from all of the blood he had lost. She immediately floated Harry over to a bed as she cast a few spells to slow his bleeding as Professor McGonagall along with Hermione, Luna, and Mathias came running into the hospital wing with Harry's arm in tow.

Professor McGonagall almost frantically screamed, "Poppy we have Harry's arm on ice so you can reattach it."

Madam Pomfrey slid open the curtain she had put in place and ushered everyone over as she gave Harry a sleeping draught before she gently laid him down and went to work on his arm as she pumped blood replenishing potions into him via a magical I.V. After nearly an hour of tireless work Harry's arm had been successfully reattached but Harry was still very pale and unconscious thanks to the sleeping draught.

Hermione was still wearing her emerald green gown that was smeared with blood but she was reassured because her link to Harry was no longer wavering like it had been earlier. She looked over at Mathias and Luna who looked decidedly exhausted before Luna looked at Hermione with a strangely lucid impression that almost looked angry before she said, "Hermione, I think we should have daddy publish an article in the quibbler about how bad it has gotten at Hogwarts when students are ruthlessly attacked during a school ball. It might seem to be in poor taste but if we publicize how Harry has been injured by Malfoy then we might swing some support and either force Umbridge out or force her to behave."

Mathias took the opportunity to pipe in, "I'm just glad Harry managed to block Nott's spell aimed at you Hermione. It was hard enough seeing Harry like that without having to see the both of you in that state would have been too much."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears and she quietly asked, "Harry, blocked the spell aimed at me. But, how did he even know it was coming?"

Mathias shrugged before Luna said, "Hermione, Harry has almost a sixth sense when it comes to things like this. How else do you think he has managed to survive as long as he has?"

Hermione's brow furrowed before she nodded and said, "I think you should send word to your father tonight Luna. It's time we start getting even, and a little character assassination followed by some ferret hunting is well in order. I need to get cleaned up and then I am staying the night here, Madam Pomfrey be damned. My soul mate

needs me tonight and I will be here for him to keep our link strong until he is strong again.” Mathias nodded dumbly as Luna merely smiled as though it was confirming something she already suspected as Hermione pulled out her wand and marched towards Gryffindor tower and she began plotting her revenge against the people who hurt her Harry.

As Hermione left the hospital wing Luna gave Mathias a deep kiss before she said, “Mathias love, I need you to stay here and guard Harry while I go send daddy an owl telling him about everything that happened here tonight. Keep Harry safe because I have a feeling that someone is going to try to finish what they started here tonight.” Mathias nodded and smiled as he disillusioned himself next to Harry’s bed and watched as Luna nearly ran out of the hospital wing in her rush to send word to her father so that something could be in tomorrow morning’s edition of the *Quibbler*.

Harry awoke late Saturday morning and little did he know just how much things had already changed. He felt a warm presence curled up next to him and when he opened his eyes he was surprised to find Hermione curled up to his back with her arm draped over his stomach. It almost pained Harry to wake her up but he needed to find out what happened the previous night. As far as he could tell his arm was back where it was supposed to be, but how did it get there?

He gently shook Hermione with his right arm afraid of moving his left arm despite its apparent presence. Hermione slowly opened her eyes to find Harry looking at her with a very confused expression on his face. Of course the last thing Hermione was interested in was giving him answers; she was much more relieved to find out that he was going to be ok even though he had lost his left arm for a time the previous night.

Hermione wrapped her arms around Harry and sobbed into his shoulder for a few minutes before she pulled away and softly asked, “How do you feel?”

Harry gave her a small smile and replied, “Well, my left arm is a little stiff and I feel a little tired. Aside from that, I just want to know what happened last night after I blocked the curse Nott shot at you.”

Hermione sniffled a little before she helped Harry into a sitting position and she crossed her legs Indian style by his side. She finally spoke and said, "I wasn't paying attention until I felt you move me to throw up the shield to block the curse from Nott. Malfoy was already casting the curse at your back so I threw up a shield as quickly as I could but it was too slow. He cut off your arm above the elbow and then I hexed him into the wall where I am sure they are still peeling him off. Mathias took care of Nott before Luna grabbed your arm and put it on ice, and Professor McGonagall had a house elf take you to the hospital wing once again this year."

Harry furrowed his brow and asked, "Am I to assume that Malfoy is still strutting around the castle like he owns it despite the fact that he has now tried and failed once again to kill me within the walls of the school?"

Hermione gave Harry a small feral grin and replied, "Well, we actually instituted a little plan that should sway public opinion a little in our favor."

Harry was about to ask what the plan was when several ministry aurors walked into the hospital wing led by Kingsley who looked at Harry with concern before he shifted into auror mode.

Kingsley firmly asked, "Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger we are here to investigate some claims made in today's issue of the Prophet as to an attack perpetrated on your persons last night by a Mr. Draco Malfoy and Mr. Theodore Nott Jr."

Harry replied, "I'm afraid I can only give you testimony as to Mr. Nott's attack which I successfully blocked before Mr. Malfoy severed my left arm above the elbow with a cutting hex. Hermione did see that attack too, if you need a pensieve account I'm sure we can help you."

Kingsley nodded and motioned two aurors forward who were carrying a pensieve. Harry pulled out his memory and Hermione quickly followed suit. After they finished Kingsley said, "I assure you Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger the perpetrators shall be dealt with summarily, and many things will be changing around the school to ensure the safety of the both of you and the rest of the school. There has been a public outcry at the second publicized attack on you by Mr. Malfoy in

the last year. For now get some rest and we will contact you if we need testimony against either Mr. Nott or Mr. Malfoy.”

Harry and Hermione smiled at Kingsley who winked before he led the auror squad out of the hospital wing to get other witness testimony, although he was fairly confident that Draco Malfoy had attended his last class at Hogwarts and Theodore Nott Jr. would be scrubbing toilets for awhile if he had anything to say on the matter.

The news spread around the wizarding world as Harry received too many get well cards and sweets to ever finish them all. He sent a letter to Sirius and company about what had happened although once again he had to resort to calling him Snuffles because Sirius was once again a fugitive of the law. He also received a brief visit from Fawkes bearing a letter from Dumbledore that simply said, *“Get well my boy. The time of my return to the castle is becoming near. Hold the line until I do return.”*

Draco Malfoy was expelled from Hogwarts although the ferret vowed he would return triumphant with his father before the end. Nott was given detention with Filch for the remainder of the year, which meant his proud pureblood hands would be cleaning toilets. They had been justly punished even though both punishments appeared to make Umbridge physically ill as she passed them down.

Public outcry led to several other reports of misconduct by Umbridge since the beginning of the term at Hogwarts; including her use of the blood quill on several students, even though Harry wasn’t included on the list. The accusations led to some dangerous opposition to Umbridge and her goon squad within the castle. Fudge was outraged with the turn of events but with the thin ice he was already skating upon, he ordered her to disband her squad and to reinstate all of the Prefects and head students to patrol the castle.

Harry was released from the hospital Saturday night and the only thing he could think as he exited the now Malfoy-less castle was that for the first time in awhile he could breath a little bit easier. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so hard to survive until April fool’s day after all. Of course Delores Umbridge had other plans that Harry could only wait to see and let pass before then.

A/N: Please review and tell me what you think. Next chapter will lead to some more fallout from the attack at the ball and you will begin to see how Umbridge plans on getting some revenge on Harry and his friends. Keep up the great reviews and please keep reading.

Chapter 39

Minister Rapidly Losing Confidence of Wizengamot

By: Rita Skeeter

In a recent interview with several anonymous members of the Wizengamot it has been revealed that Minister Cornelius Fudge's personal war against militias has been less of an attempt to protect his followers and more of an attempt to attack and challengers to his power even at the cost of lives.

Other startling revelations have forward indicating the minister has unjustly charged Albus Dumbledore because the order of Merlin recipient insisted that you-know-who had returned and the public should be informed. With the recent attack on Diagon Alley it has all but become known that Dumbledore was indeed correct.

With these revelations in mind it is merely a question of when not if Minister Fudge is removed from office and will be forever remembered as one of our most ineffective Minister's of Magic in the last 500 years.

Life at Hogwarts had been surprisingly pleasant after the attempt on Harry and Hermione's lives at the Valentine's Day ball. Hermione was exceedingly pleased that she was a prefect again and Harry was happy because that meant they could have some quality time on rounds like they had earlier in the year.

Katie had cracked the whip even harder than Harry had expected in their practices before the final match of the year. Partially because she had cancelled the practice for the day after the ball as a result of Harry's injuries, and partially because she felt the match had taken on even more importance because of the events that transpired at the ball. Katie was a muggleborn witch and she could think of nothing more satisfying than shoving Umbridge's pureblood supremacy lunacy back in her face on a very public stage.

It was on the practice before the final match of the season that found Harry floating above the stadium near the stands as he carried on a private conversation with Hermione.

Harry watched as the chasers burnt Ron for what seemed like the one hundredth time in the practice, as Katie screamed at Ron to focus. Harry could tell by the red in Ron's ears that focus was something he was incapable of at the moment as he fought to keep control of the problematic Weasley temper.

Harry sighed and quietly spoke to Hermione, "I can't see how she has played with the twins for as many years as she has and yet she still can't pick up the telltale signs of Weasley meltdown near its pinnacle. Granted, Molly has the worst of it but Ron would easily come in second in regards to that irrational temper of theirs."

Hermione giggled, fully understanding Harry's observation, having been at the receiving end of those two particular Weasley tempers more times than she cared to remember. She finally said, "Well in their defense, the only time I have ever seen the twins angry is when you thwarted their attempt to prank you at Black Manor this past summer when you turned their own prank against them. Even then, they weren't mad at you love; they were mad at themselves for having their own prank turned against them."

Harry nodded as he watched said pranksters floating off at the other end of the pitch obviously discussing something of importance. Harry felt Hermione's amusement as she watched Ron miss another shot by McLaggen that any competent keeper would stop.

Hermione glanced over at Harry lovingly and asked, "Harry, I know we haven't really heard anything on this front for awhile and while that probably is good news; we need to figure out where Ginny sits in all of this. I think we've finally dealt with our Ron demons and now we need to deal with Ginny."

Harry nodded and said, "I think we should give her help if she asks for it. That way she can keep her independence but isn't alone." Hermione nodded thoughtfully before they relapsed back into a comfortable silence spent watching the Quidditch practice below them. They watched for an indeterminate amount of time before

Harry broke both of them out of their musings when he asked, "So what are you going to tell Professor McGonagall when she asks you about your career choice?"

Hermione smirked and replied, "Oh well I've already tendered my application for Minister of Magic didn't you hear?" Harry chuckled before she continued somewhat more seriously, "I was thinking of going into education and a professorship here at Hogwarts in either Charms or Transfiguration depending on which position opens up first." She stopped speaking looking intently at Harry before asking, "What about you love?"

Harry smiled crookedly and replied almost distractedly, "Well I've been told twice that the school needs two Professor Potters so I reckon I should put an end to the Defense Professor Jinx. I sure as hell would be an improvement over anyone, save Remus, that we have had since we started here." Hermione nodded absently thinking that what she had seen from Harry in the DA he would have been an improvement on Remus as well although it was more of praise for Harry than a disparagement for Remus. They both looked down at the pitch again and shook their heads when it appeared Katie had finally given up on Ron for the day.

Katie had seen that pushing any more for the day would result in even more damage to Ron's fragile ego, so she called practice and held Ron over, likely to persuade Ron with threats of violence to get his head out of his arse before she decided to pull him for Colin against Slytherin.

Harry pulled Hermione on to his broom despite her protests and flew them both back down to the ground at a leisurely pace to calm Hermione's nerves at her first broom ride since the previous year and to keep the door open for some snogging later that night.

The next morning, which also happened to be the Friday before the match against Slytherin, Harry and Hermione were sitting in the great hall having their standard quiet early breakfast when the post owls arrived and dropped off the morning edition of the daily prophet which had changed its tune recently after the attack on Diagon Alley.

Harry hated to admit it, but his actions that day were steadily becoming legend, as someone had leaked word that one wizard took on 20 giants and walked away without a scratch. The truth of the statement had also made its way back to the giant tribes that Hagrid and Maxime had worked on, and they all decided any future ventures would assuredly be on the side of the light and not at Voldemort's beck and call.

Today's edition of the paper had a blistering headline that upon reading it caused Hermione to drop her cup of tea and glance at Harry almost despairingly.

Identity of Mystery Wizard Who Saved Diagon Alley Revealed by Source at Site

By: Rita Skeeter

Over the course of the past months following the attack on Diagon Alley this reporter has been diligently working on discovering what wizard is to thank for saving countless hundreds from a Giant and Dementor attack.

Thanks to an anonymous source it has been uncovered that no one less than Harry Potter and a few companions single handedly stopped the devastation you-know-who had obviously planned for the day. Potter was rumored to have successfully stopped a horde of Giants on his own as his companions dealt with numerous deatheaters that had been captured after the slow arrival of aurors hastened the group's departure.

Almost as impressive was the discovery of several dementors' cloaks signaling that Potter and his friends have somehow managed to destroy the creatures long thought to have been immortal. Following the attack the dementors returned to Azkaban rumored to have been frightened so much at the loss of some of their kind that their support of you-know-who was pulled.

Several important questions must be raised about the entirety of the events at Diagon Alley. First, do we as the general public want to condone Minister Fudge's hard-line against the heroes he deems a threat to our way of life? Or is it that Minister Fudge views these

defenders of the light as a threat to his power base which he has placed more importance over than the safety of the public?

I for one wish to apologize to Mr. Potter about my derogatory articles from the previous year, and to send my thanks and the thanks of countless others for standing up for what is right in the face of our current and hopefully soon-to-be former minister of magic.

Harry looked at Hermione and they each shared an expression of fear and anxiety that Harry had been revealed as several other order members had been. Harry was afraid of a lot of things but mostly he feared having to leave the castle with Umbridge still in charge and with Hermione at the foul toad's mercy.

Hermione sensed Harry's discomfort and her logical mind kicked into gear when she grasped what Skeeter was actually doing with the article. Hermione grabbed Harry's arm to get his attention and she almost joyously said, "Don't you see Harry?" Harry looked at her with confusion and she almost laughed at his expression before she continued, "Rita Skeeter did this so that Fudge couldn't do anything about it. By publicly revealing you as this great hero who saved lives while participating in a militia, she has forced Fudge's hand and he'll have to repeal the law unless he wants to be booted from office. This means that everyone who had to go into hiding can come back out except for Dumbledore. Unfortunately he is wanted for something else. But the way Fudge is going it won't be too much longer and he'll have to give that up." Hermione bit her lip as though a thought was coming to her.

Harry knew the look quite well, and in combination with the fact that he felt a spike of glee no doubt from a realization or idea she had come up with across their link, he smiled and asked, "Ok Hermione what brilliant plan have you come up with to help Dumbledore?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "What do you think about doing an interview with Rita before we get rid of Umbridge? I think we can get her out of the castle but more importantly expose her as a deatheater along with any others in the castle with a little help from her."

Harry arched his eyebrow and then they shared a look which few if any staff members knew what it meant. One did however; as Minerva

McGonagall watched the pair with interest she fought to keep a smile off of her face. She had dealt with the antics of the marauders twenty years earlier and she knew the looks they shared when they had come up with a particularly masterful prank. On account of the fact that all of their pranks for the year had involved Umbridge as their target she couldn't avoid it when the corners of her mouth twitched upward in anticipation of what they would do to the foul woman next.

After a day spent on homework and review in the library they began their prefect rounds much like they had earlier in the year.

As they walked down the corridor to the Charm's classroom they would stop intermittently to share a snog or to usher another couple out of a broom closet thanks to the ever handy tool of the marauders map.

Harry had earlier voiced his wonder that a map designed specifically to avoid prefects and staff while sneaking around the school, and how now it was used to flush out others trying to sneak around all in the interest of getting some quality snogging time with Hermione. After he had gotten over his wonder he realized that the current use of the map was just as marauder worthy as sneaking down to Hogsmeade to get some firewhiskey.

Hermione had come up with the additional idea of casting a *confundus* charm on them so that anyone watching wouldn't be able to figure out what the map was or that they were snogging in many inappropriate areas of the school while technically on duty.

As they prepared to turn down the corridor leading away from the Charms classroom the map suddenly revealed the presence of a particularly hated individual and a few of her remaining goons from the now defunct inquisitorial squad.

As they crossed into the sight of Umbridge and her goons they calmly deflected several lethal spells hurled in their direction as their eyes flashed with magic.

They finally came upon the group and with a few deft flicks of their wands froze the group in place allowing only their eyes to watch in

horror as they scanned the group with their wands trained on each of them, holding their very lives in hand.

Harry smiled faintly when his eyes came upon Umbridge and he casually said, "Hermione, what are the prescribed remedies of an unprovoked attack by a pureblood of old family members under the HPA?"

Hermione smiled almost maliciously, and definitely predatorily, as her animagus form made a brief appearance before she said, "We have a couple of options Harry. First, we could challenge them all to duels, with their penalty when they lost, a revocation of their blood status. Our other option is to respond in kind with the same spells they cast at us which we could reveal with a nice *priori incantem*."

Harry laughed as the expression in each of the seventh year Slytherins and Umbridge clearly indicated they would have all gulped nervously if they could. Harry scratched his chin thoughtfully as Hermione giggled at the sheer feel of mischievousness Harry was radiating through their link. Harry finally lowered his eyes at Umbridge and with a voice of steel said, "I think for now we shall forestall any retribution, but provoke us again and you will have a very swift and just end coming to you."

Hermione shook her head at the sad group of frozen witches and wizards before they cancelled their spells and continued down the hallway not bothering to look back at the group with over half of its members already having soiled themselves.

The next morning as they sat in the great hall awaiting the final Quidditch match of the season Harry and Hermione were once again startled by the headline of the daily prophet as the redeemed Rita Skeeter had some good news for the populace of Great Britain once again.

Minister Fudge Revokes Law Prohibiting Private Militias

By: Rita Skeeter

In a surprising move Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge has revoked a law he had passed only a scant three months earlier. The law

specifically prohibited the membership of any citizen in an active private militia.

It is widely held the move was a direct slight at the mysterious group that was synonymous in the battle against you-know-who in the last war The Order of the Phoenix. The only two confirmed members of the group are Albus Dumbledore still a fugitive wanted on similar charges, and Harry Potter, the-boy-who-lived.

Both Potter and Dumbledore are responsible for defeating the previous two dark lords in some capacity as it is widely known. Dumbledore defeated the dark wizard Grindewald in 1945 while Potter defeated Voldemort on Halloween of 1981 in Godric's Hollow.

While the law has removed a portion of the onus that Fudge has placed upon himself with his very questionable and politically motivated moves since the end of the tri-wizard tournament, the future still remains to see if Fudge will allow our greatest heroes to fight the battle alongside ministry support instead of against it.

Harry looked at Hermione with more than a touch of awe before he said, "You do know that you are brilliant don't you?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders even though she was sporting a very large grin, both at Harry's reaction and the end result that people like Remus, Sirius, and Emmeline were no longer fugitives of the law. Hermione then secretly prayed that Dumbledore wasn't far behind so that he could retake his position as headmaster as soon as the deatheater ward had been put in place. The one thing neither wanted nor needed was another ministry lackey spewing Fudge's beliefs taking over again.

When the hall started filling up with those of the student population not carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders they were joined by a once again very green looking Ron who was ushered to the table to at least make an attempt at eating some food.

Harry looked at his friend and smiled before he sarcastically asked, "Hey mate, nervous about today's match?"

Ron looked at Harry like he had grown a second head before he weakly replied, "No Harry I am just fine." Of course everyone at the table knew that was about the furthest thing from the truth, but Harry had already talked Ron down from his nerves twice during the year and Ron was trying to avoid making it a clean sweep.

Harry rolled his eyes at Ron and made a mental note to not waste anytime in catching the snitch in the match. Even though it pained Harry to admit it, Malfoy was the closest thing Harry had to competition as a seeker in the school and without him Slytherin really didn't harbor any chance at catching the snitch unless they took him out of the match. As Harry came to this realization, he made another mental note to put on his dragonhide suit for the match, even if it was slightly less comfortable flying while wearing it.

After they finished breakfast Harry ran up to the common room and put on his armor before he slid on his Quidditch uniform and went down the stairs with his firebolt to find Hermione waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. She gave Harry a hug and kiss on the lips before she arched her eyebrow in question when she felt Harry's armor underneath his uniform. Harry made a grim smile and she hugged him again in understanding before she took his hand and they made their way down to the pitch for the match to decide the Quidditch cup, and would also go a long way in determining the house cup.

As they separated with Harry going to the Gryffindor locker room while Hermione took her usual position in the stands she gave him quick snog which he enthusiastically returned before she broke the kiss and cheekily said, "There's more where that came from if you catch the snitch love." Harry smiled and walked into the locker room as Hermione shook her head fondly and scurried over to the stands for her spot next to Neville, Luna, Susan, and Mathias in the Gryffindor stands.

In the Gryffindor Locker room Katie was in the midst of an impassioned speech about the match being about more than beating Slytherin or even winning the Quidditch cup. Katie said, "This match is about showing people like Umbridge that as long as there are bigots and narrow minded people like her, there will be people like us to show her how wrong she is. This team is a mixture of purebloods,

half-bloods, and muggleborn students and we work together for a higher goal. Let's show the toad why one doesn't mess with a lion in its den."

Fred and George let out a pair of war cries and everyone followed as they burst out of the locker room to the roars of almost the entire student population and most of the staff aside from one or two abstainers.

They all mounted their brooms and soared into the perfectly clear early spring sky as the Gryffindor stands reverberated with a chant of **Lions, Lions, Lions.**

Lee Jordan opened up the match by announcing, "Today's match is for all of the marbles and the Quidditch cup. The Gryffindor Lions led by Captain and chaser Katie Bell will be taking on the Slytherin Snakes led by Captain and beater Christian Warrington.

Harry snickered as Warrington mounted his broom clumsily, probably still a little shaky from the meeting in the hallways the previous night in the attempted ambush.

Harry didn't even bother to find out the name of the Slytherin seeker but did absently note he looked like a younger clone of Malfoy right up to the slicked back blonde hair.

As the coin flip went to Slytherin Warrington was smart enough to put Ron down by the Slytherin stands. Harry shook his head as Ron shakily steered his broom over to the goals.

Madam Hooch released the balls and the match was underway as Harry scanned the skies for the telltale flash of gold he associated with victory.

As Harry flew through the air his concentration solely focused on finding the snitch he absently heard the score as Lee announced it was 20-20.

Harry glanced down and could see Ron was clearly struggling with even easy shots. He caught Katie's eyes and she had a pleading

expression that was clearly asking to catch the snitch before it was too late. Harry gave her an incremental nod and redoubled his efforts.

As he was circling in the sky he flew towards the Slytherin stands and caught the glimmer of gold as it flashed straight down towards the pitch and Harry took off in pursuit. The hairs on the back of his neck stood and he did a quick barrel roll miraculously avoiding a very nasty looking violet colored curse. He glanced back and when he couldn't make out a likely suspect he continued his spiral to the ground feeling fortunate that the snitch had not decided to make any turns.

The Slytherin seeker hadn't given up the chase, although he wasn't a serious threat as Harry sped up into a blur as he flattened out inches from the turf totally oblivious to the gasps from the crowd. He inverted for a moment before he rolled back around and was reaching for the snitch with an outstretched hand.

Little did Harry know that Fred and George were having the match of their lives keeping the bludger, which had been repeatedly, hit at him by Slytherin's beaters, away from their investor and honorary surrogate little brother.

As Harry neared the opposing goal the Slytherin keeper tried to distract Harry by flying on a direct line towards Harry. It was a high stakes game of chicken as Harry sped towards the fourth year Slytherin who finally veered his broom out of Harry's path before he crashed into Warrington.

Harry sped up as he neared the goals and veered up towards the goals themselves. Harry realized this fact as he closed his hand around the snitch and flew through the center hoop to the laughs and cheers of the crowd as Harry captured the snitch and scored himself.

Harry slowed down and turned back towards the pitch when he heard Lee scream out, "Potter catches the snitch as he scores himself. Gryffindor wins the match 220-170 and Gryffindor wins the Quidditch cup."

As Harry touched down on the pitch he was mobbed by teammates as he mentally checked the score and realized Ron had given up seventeen goals and the match hadn't even taken twenty minutes.

With a shake of his head he was tackled to the pitch by Hermione who gave him a deep kiss as she ran her hands through his wind swept hair.

She reluctantly broke the kiss as they heard the cat calls from the various people on the pitch. Harry spryly popped up to his feet before helping Hermione up to hers. He helped her on to his broom and they flew back to the castle eager to continue what they had started on the pitch during the big party sure to follow the match.

As the various Gryffindors piled into the common room, Harry and Hermione watched from their favorite chair in their favorite position. The twins were carried into the room and given a hero's procession followed by similar arrangements for each of the chasers until Ron came in dragging up the caboose with Lavender there to console Ron who was obviously distraught over his lackadaisical performance.

As the butterbeers were passed around, Fred and George stalked their way over to Harry and Hermione before tossing the couple a pair of butterbeers.

Harry popped the cork on his bottle before he asked, "So guys, I imagine I have you to thank for being able to finish my day in the common room instead of the hospital wing?"

Fred and George shared a look before they both replied, "You could say that Harrykins. Of course we also prefer to remember that you've also prevented Ron from being the laughingstock of the school by not stopping a single shot all match. So we'll call it even if you don't mind." Harry nodded before chancing a glance over at a very sullen and depressed looking Ron who appeared to be halfway in the bag already if the red in his cheeks was any indication.

Harry looked back at the twins and raised his bottle of butterbeer in a toast before he said, "To the best beaters to have ever played for Gryffindor house. If it wasn't for them I'd probably be a walking bludger target." They all chuckled at the joke and toasted before taking a swig of the sweet beverage. Fred and George patted Harry's back before heading back into the throngs.

Harry watched the twins retreat back into the party before he began to kiss Hermione's neck which prompted her to giggle and run her hands through Harry's hair.

Harry pulled away and sadly said, "You do realize it's not going to be the same around here next year without those two."

Hermione smiled at Harry and kissed the tip of his nose before she whispered into his ear, "I think I can keep you preoccupied enough so that you don't have to worry about it."

Harry's reply was lost to the ages as Hermione pulled him down into a record breaking snog as they both tuned out the remainder of the party in pursuit of a more pleasurable activity.

A/N: There was chapter 40. I hope you enjoyed the slightly lighter tone of the chapter. Next chapter we have an interview with Rita Skeeter and the formulation of a plot truly worthy of the Marauders. We also have a DA meeting and an interesting conversation with a nearly forgotten character. **Please Review and tell me what you think. Keep reading and I hope you enjoyed the chapter.**

Chapter 40

As life continued at Hogwarts, and the temperatures rose and any lingering snows melted away, plots were being hatched from within the castle by a certain young witch to strike out on her own, with the help of a forgotten person.

As Ginny Weasley sat in the library and read countless legal texts on adoption and emancipation of minors, she was also striking up a relationship with the other Weasley child currently on the outs with the rest of the family, in Percy.

Ginny was well aware that her presence in the castle was largely thanks to Harry and Hermione, and she had no further wishes to tangle with that couple ever again. However, she did realize that in order to become what she was meant to, she needed to be out from under her mother's loving, but often smothering, thumb and into a position of independence. She realized she needed to follow Harry and Hermione's expressed wishes but that didn't mean she couldn't learn other things that would prove useful in her summers.

As she finally reached the specific law she was looking for, she smiled genuinely and pulled a piece of parchment to write the letter that was going to change her life for better or for worse, but for the first time she truly felt that it would be of her doing and no one else's.

Meanwhile in the Transfiguration class an entirely different plot was about to be hatched, as Harry and Hermione intently, or intently as possible, listened as Professor McGonagall described the theory of human transfiguration even though it wouldn't be taught until the N.E.W.T version of the class for those fortunate enough to get an E or better on their OWL for the class.

Harry was taking notes while he was also thinking of another burden. Multi-tasking and organization of one's thoughts was a beneficial bonus of learning Occlumency and Harry found it rather easy to pay attention in class while plotting other actions well in advance. Today he found himself mentally preparing himself for his interview with Rita Skeeter which Hermione had insisted be held in the Shrieking Shack to ensure their privacy.

Hermione noted the general direction of Harry's thoughts as she took notes on a topic she had mastered over the summer with Harry's help in order to become an animagus. They had refrained on telling anyone else about their planned meeting because it would involve employing those same skills to sneak away from the castle undetected and to sneak back just as quietly, the plan would involve even remembering their secret passage to Gryffindor tower that they often used after taking a walk around the lake to talk or snog.

After class was dismissed they went and enjoyed a quiet breakfast in the great hall going over their notes for the interview and what they wanted to accomplish in it. If any of the other Gryffindors found their behavior to be strange they didn't vocalize these concerns, as the most studious pair in the house were entrenched in a very heady conversation.

After they finished their lunch and their discussion on the interview, Hermione grabbed Harry's hand and led him outside of the castle for their care of magical creatures class with Professor Grubbly-Plank. As they reached the area where the class was typically held they noticed an old friend they hoped would be returning to the castle to stay and very soon.

Fawkes was on a perch obviously placed up by Grubbly-Plank as he trilled merrily upon spotting Harry and Hermione. Harry and Hermione walked over to their phoenix friend and were surprised when he was preening himself and removed a letter embedded somewhere out of sight.

With a shared look Harry unwrapped the parchment after Hermione put up a confundus charm and a few privacy charms, as had become their shared routine especially with Umbridge still in the castle.

Harry and Hermione,
I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing because my time of
return will be soon. I pray your plans for Madam Umbridge will be in
place before the middle of April.

I have enjoyed a great amount of success in procuring another Horcrux, but I believe I am in need of both of your expertise's to safely dispatch of it. I have done a considerable amount of research

on Tom's lineage and have found a ring from his mother's family that he had imbued with a piece of his soul after murdering his father and paternal grandparents.

Once again the ring has numerous curses placed upon it like the locket, and I believe it would be wise once I return to the castle to make a return trip down to the chamber of secrets to harvest some more basilisk venom, fangs, and any other materials we can from the great beast.

I have received word from Sirius and reading the paper that things have been improving rapidly since the attack at the ball; which I feel at least partly responsible enough for by being unable to expel young Mr. Malfoy last year when I should have. I had hoped he could be redeemed, but now I see my foolish hopes have almost cost Harry his life once again. I apologize and I will make this and my past sins up to you.

I also found upon my last trip to Gringott's that Harry rightfully fined me for failing to show him his parent's will and also following it as I should have. Once again I will make it up to you, but you both must wait to find what I plan to do. I also have it on good account from Ms. Granger's parents that the DA progresses nicely. Continue with the group because I believe it will be the greatest contribution either of you can make for the order at the moment.

Papa Phoenix

Harry and Hermione shared a look before they both burst out laughing at the moniker Dumbledore had used to sign his letter, and they planned on calling him the namesake as much as possible in the future because it seemed oddly appropriate for the old wizard. Harry smiled as he placed the letter in his bag and rubbed Fawkes while Hermione dropped the charms surrounding them just as Professor Grubbly-Plank and the rest of the class filtered towards them for a lecture on the phoenix that Harry and Hermione both knew quite well.

After the remainder of the day went by quickly as Herbology had already begun OWL review because of the similarities in several

magical plants and the need to make the proper distinctions in how to care for them.

As they sat in the great hall eating dinner Harry whispered into Hermione's ear, "Hermione, we need to leave here by 7 if we are going to meet Rita by 8. That is unless you want to take the same way to the shack we took in third year."

Hermione scrunched her nose up in thought as she bit her lip, before she finally replied, "I think we should take the passage by the Whomping Willow." Harry nodded and they ate the remainder of dinner in silence holding hands trying to pull all of the comfort they could out of their few moments of peace and quiet each day.

After dinner they made their way out towards Hagrid's cabin before they checked to see if the coast was clear and transformed into their forms and slowly made their way to the Whomping willow. Harry and Hermione ran into the same gap Sirius had with Ron nearly two years earlier before they transformed back and began to slow walk in the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack and the important interview with Rita Skeeter.

When they reached the Shrieking Shack about twenty minutes early Hermione had Harry conjure up three comfortable chairs seeing as Harry's conjuring skills were a bit better than her own and she always enjoyed watching Harry using his imagination when his magic was involved.

Harry had come up with three very nice leather reclining chairs complete with foot rests and he had even conjured a few butterbeers for the interview. All in all she thought Harry had done a very good job of making the interview situation as comfortable as humanly possible.

Rita showed up right on time and Harry motioned her to sit in her chair and offered her a butterbeer which she gladly took. Harry had taken a rather dignified posture in his chair as he steepled his fingers together in a manner that actually reminded her quite a lot of Dumbledore.

Rita took a few minutes to get herself organized and to Harry and Hermione's delight she manufactured her own quill so that anything they said wouldn't be misinterpreted.

Rita finally started the interview and asked, "Mr. Potter, what is your recollection from the attack at Diagon Alley on Christmas Eve?"

Harry almost mechanically relived the events of the day as he replied, "I was doing some Christmas shopping when I felt the vibrations of the approaching Giants while I was in Madam Malkin's. I had as many people in the store and in the surrounding stores get to safety as possible. I along with my accompanying guards from the Order of the Phoenix engaged the various deatheaters and giants that had begun the attack. I took on the giants and was able to restrain 18 of them using various spells. I heard a cry for help and was forced to kill the last two giants; before I apparated over to the other end of the alley where I saved a young woman from a very gruesome death at the hands of Lucius Malfoy."

Harry took a deep breath and needed a moment to compose his emotions, as Rita understandingly allowed him all of the time in the world to finish the interview. Harry continued after Hermione had hugged him and whispered some words of comfort into his ear. He added, "I disarmed Malfoy and he apparated away and the dementors came in the next wave of the attack. We were able to use a combination of spells not repeatable by the typical witch or wizard to destroy roughly thirty of them. We were forced to leave upon repelling the dementors out of fear of imprisonment at the hands of the ministry. The last few months have been very difficult on a few fronts."

Rita nodded and asked, "In what ways would you improve the ministry if you had the ability?"

Harry smiled and said, "I believe Hermione here would be best to answer that question. We are of the same mind on most issues and I believe she can best put our views into words."

Rita smiled and then looked at Hermione apologetically and said, "Ms. Granger I wanted to apologize to you also on the articles I wrote up

last year. They were baseless accusations that I am sure caused you a lot of pain you didn't deserve."

Hermione nodded stiffly and replied, "I appreciate the apology, and I must say that yes last year was very difficult because of your articles. I hope you have learned your lesson as to the true responsibility of the press." Rita nodded respectfully before Hermione continued, "The ministry needs to take several immediate steps if it wishes to survive Voldemort's presence in the coming months and years. First, it needs to repeal all of the discriminatory laws it has passed including anti-muggleborn, anti-werewolf, and anti-other sentient being legislation. Most of this legislature has been passed due to the actions and work of Madam Delores Umbridge. She has personally been responsible for several attacks upon Harry and me during the current school year. This brings about another thing the ministry needs to address. The safety of the students at Hogwarts should be nearly paramount for the ministry, because without a future the culture of wizarding Great Britain will collapse quickly."

Harry added, "Yes, we both have found that the current administration leading the ministry has been far too concerned with their own political welfare, as opposed to the welfare of its constituents."

Hermione gave Harry a quick peck on the cheek and continued, "The ministry has also done many good things in the past year including building up the auror forces, although one might question why such actions would be taken unless the minister himself believed or had reason to know of Voldemort's return. That also brings up the topic of our Headmaster and the leader of the light Albus Dumbledore. He is currently a fugitive of the law based upon trumped up charges brought by the minister personally. We have personal knowledge that indicates that Minister Fudge attempted to ambush the headmaster and deputy headmistress right before the holiday break here at Hogwarts. These are not the actions of a man that has the best interests of the people at heart, are they?"

Rita merely smiled appreciating Hermione's spunk and well spoken nature. She could now see how and why Harry had gotten together with the young witch.

Harry added, "Are there any other specific questions you would like answered Ms. Skeeter?"

Rita smiled and replied, "I actually only have one more question, seeing as how fully you've answered the first two questions. If you could tell the average witch or wizard one thing to do to ensure they survive the conflict ahead what would it be?"

Harry frowned for a moment thinking of various spells and magic the average witch or wizard could use. He ultimately came to the realization that there was no spell that could stop the killing curse. He finally smiled and replied, "Unless you are trained in matters of combat I would suggest to the average witch or wizard to run when confronted by Voldemort's forces. Be prepared to apparate or carry an emergency portkey to a safe place at all times. There is no way to stop a killing curse. My parents learned that the hard way as did I by proxy and I hope more children don't have to learn that the same way. The only way parents can truly show their children how much they love them is to be around to show it. I have no doubts that my parents loved me, but they weren't prepared the night they were murdered. That shouldn't be an excuse for people any more. We all know the realities of the situation and we should do our best to survive the fight and to live like we should regardless of Voldemort's threat."

Rita looked at Harry with more than a touch of admiration as Hermione's eyes had filled with tears when Harry had talked about his parents and how he didn't want more children growing up without parents. He couldn't have used a more poignant, touching, and powerful analogy if he had tried.

Rita smiled sadly and said, "I really appreciate the both of you taking time to do this interview. It will be in tomorrow morning's edition of the daily prophet. I will personally ensure everything written about you and Ms. Granger from here on will be truthful and flattering. Once again I must thank you both, and wish you both good luck in the times ahead."

Harry and Hermione smiled and nodded and saw Rita out of the front entrance of the shack. Harry banished the chairs and grabbed one last butterbeer for the walk back out to the entrance by the Whomping

Willow. Hermione took his hand and they silently walked back down the corridor as she thought about what Harry had said at the end of the interview.

When they neared the exit she pulled Harry down slightly into a long snog as Harry stumbled back into the wall and Hermione ran her hands through his hair as Harry ran his arms gently up her sides. When they finally broke the kiss she smiled slightly and asked, "Harry, what you said about parents being around to show their children they love them, have you thought about your parents in that context often?"

Harry sighed and bent down to kiss the tip of Hermione's nose before he replied, "I've come to realize my parents knew that it was their destiny to die so I could live. It doesn't make it any easier to accept their deaths, but like I told you earlier this year I understand it now. But, most parents don't have children with the destiny to save the world on their shoulders. Those people are better suited to run with their children. They can always rebuild their houses but it is much harder to rebuild following a lost life."

Hermione smiled warmly and gave Harry one last kiss on the lips before she cheekily asked, "Since when did you start channeling Dumbledore Harry?"

Harry snorted and replied, "I wouldn't say I am channeling anyone. But, if I start offering you lemon drops please promise you'll stun me?" Hermione giggled and they shifted back to their forms for the walk back to the castle.

The next day went by rather quickly, until the DA meeting that had been scheduled to meet at the now typical time period before astronomy. It was the second meeting of the month so Harry had the largest battle duel to date planned. It was going to be a partner duel like the last time but the room was going to up the difficult setting a lot and if a person was knocked out of the game they would have a very unpleasant surprise waiting for them.

As everyone filed into the room of requirement, Harry decided to up the stakes a little more by changing the scenario to make it a full moon and therefore susceptible to werewolf attacks.

Harry had been quite pleased with the groups' progress since the Christmas holidays in everything except for the patronus. Now he was going to truly see what everyone was made of in a test which if the DA had been a class would have been the final exam.

Harry stood up at his lectern and began the meeting as he said, "Hello everyone, to the last formal DA meeting of the year. We will meet again the last couple of months of school but they will merely serve as review of what we have already covered this year. Tonight however, we are going to up the stakes a little. The difficulty will be a touch below what it would be in real life. I want each of you to experience the attack on Diagon Alley as I did but on a much larger scale. The deatheaters and giants will be able to hurt you but not seriously or permanently. Imagine being hit with a killing curse and having the wind knocked out of you for the remainder of the exercise" Harry smiled grimly at the few grimaces in the group before he continued, "In other words, it won't be pleasant if you in essence die in this exercise. My hope is that all of you survive to the end of the exercise with the only rules being that you can not attack each other or work together beyond your pairings. While I would like to think we could all work together during an attack it is far more likely that only two of us would together at once at most. Pair up and when I have seen you all take your partners I will begin the exercise. Since Dean has been removed from the group I will allow one group of three for the exercise."

Harry watched the normal groups form and he smiled slightly before he said, "In short, tonight's exercise will be like the attack with a few exceptions. The attack will take place on Hogwarts grounds at night on a full moon. I assume all of you understand the implications of both a night and full moon attack. There may be a few vampires, werewolves, and other dark creatures to go along with the usual suspects." He glanced around and could see many pale faces and a few that were flushed in grim anticipation probably out of a combination of their magic and adrenalin.

He closed his eyes and sent his requirements of the battle to the room before it shifted from light to dark and he calmly said, "The battle for Hogwarts starts now!"

Immediately the room revealed the pale moon lighting the backdrop of Hogwarts although a great shadow appeared to be looming over the beacon for light as the distant rumble of approaching Giants.

Harry and Hermione shared a look before they disillusioned themselves and manufactured both of their wands not particularly enamored with the idea of having the wind knocked out of them or what that would signify for the exercise.

As Harry and Hermione made their way around the virtual Hogwarts grounds they watched in the distance as it appeared Luna and Mathias were engaged in a firefight with a group of about five deatheaters. They were more than holding their own when Harry and Hermione happened upon a pair of werewolves out for blood.

Harry immediately cast a hex that shot a silver arrow at the smaller werewolf and killed before it even had a chance to bare its fangs. The larger werewolf lunged at Hermione but she conjured a large silver shield which had the great beast snarling as it leapt away. Harry pulled Gryffindor's sword from its sheath and sprung into action. After the werewolf dodged his opening attack Harry summoned the beast into the tip of his sword and lifted his leg to kick the beast off of his sword before he sheathed the sword once again and pulled his wands back out of their holsters with a slight smile to Hermione.

Hermione merely shook her head as a great bell tolling was heard in the distance before a pair of virtual images of Seamus and Parvati lit the sky with a pair of resounding KIA's next to their names.

Harry shook his head in disappointment before his eyes became determined and he walked towards the edge of the Forbidden Forest to investigate a sound he heard. Hermione quickly caught up with him. They reached the edge of the forest and they were immediately surrounded by several deatheaters.

As they prepared for the barrage of spells Harry came up with an idea and waited until they had begun to cast before he grabbed Hermione's arm and cast a hover charm on them as they watched several deatheaters fall to their own compatriots spells. As they lined up for a second wave of spells Harry cancelled the hover charm and both Harry and Hermione dropped the remainder of deatheaters as

their final spells harmlessly fizzled out in the night sky where Harry and Hermione had been a scant moment earlier.

Hermione gave Harry a breathtaking smile before she said, "Harry that was brilliant." Harry gave her a small smile before he shrugged his shoulders and they continued.

Unfortunately as they had dispatched of the deatheaters the bell tolled again and revealed that Ernie, Hannah, Padma, and Blaise all dropped into the category of KIA. Harry caught the tail end of the indicator and sighed deeply before Hermione grasped his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Harry began to think of who was remaining and was surprised to note that Lavender and Ron were still in the fight which pleased him immensely.

Hermione tugged on his hand and led them down towards the lake to find the remainder of the DA engaged in various fights with the remaining giants, werewolves, vampires, and scant remaining deatheaters.

Harry smiled and cast a spell that mimicked the effects of the sun which quickly dispatched of the vampires even though Hermione grimly said, "That might work on these vampires love, but older ones are immune to the effects of the sun." Harry nodded in agreement before they continued down towards the lake to engage a group of giants.

Harry glanced and watched the remaining DA members fighting the good fight. Ron and Lavender were fighting a pair of werewolves and having mixed success. The twins were engaged in a serious battle with a very menacing giant. Neville and Susan were dealing with a pair of smaller giants rather efficiently. Mathias and Luna had actually cornered five werewolves with some rather inventive transfiguration of rocks into some silver cages. Daphne appeared to be in trouble against a giant and as Harry watched she was clubbed by the beast into the virtual lake and her name flashed in the sky as another KIA. The most interesting pair Harry spotted was Alicia and Cho who were dealing with the last three remaining deatheaters in a very intriguing way. Alicia was summoning objects to block the killing curses as Cho gradually weakened the deatheaters before Harry watched her finish

them off with a rapid fire succession of reducto curses. When they finally reached the lake Harry and Hermione engaged a pair of giants and dispatched of them easily.

However, as the giants dropped Harry and Hermione felt the telltale cold that meant that the dementors were coming in at the end of the battle like always to deal with the weak and wounded remaining. Harry and Hermione cast their patroni and watched as the dementors that survived hastened a quick retreat signaling the end of the battle. The room returned to normal as Harry's position in the room immediately oriented to allow Harry to stand at the front by the lectern.

Harry looked around the room before he spoke as every ear strained to hear him, "That was a real as it is going to get for the DA until the war actually finds us. We suffered seven losses out of nineteen members. While I admit that is higher than I had been hoping for, I also must admit that I saw a lot of inventive battle strategies out there and I wish to congratulate those standing at the end for a job well done. The remainder of meetings will be optional and we can review or perhaps deal with individual requests as to other spells you may wish for me to demonstrate and then we can practice. I must insist that you all find a way to practice some of these skills over the course of the summer so that you can be prepared for anything that may come your way. Keep an eye on your galleons for our next meeting. That is all for tonight." With the dismissal the group filtered out of the room. Harry and Hermione soon followed although Hermione was sporting a frown at the warring emotions of disappointment and pride.

When they reached the astronomy tower Professor Sinistra was pointing out some constellations that a few Hufflepuff's had missed on their star charts. Hermione pulled Harry aside cast some powerful privacy charms and asked, "Love, what are you so disappointed about from the duel tonight? I mean I know you wanted everyone to survive, but you have to be reasonable and understand that more people will die before Voldemort is defeated. As much as it pains you and me it will happen because Voldemort wants it to happen."

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose and replied, "Hermione, my brain fully understands that. But, my heart can't take much more lose. I just feel this void in my heart that hasn't went away since I watched

Cedric get hit by that curse. I saw three aurors die at Diagon Alley and my nightmares haven't gotten any better since then."

Hermione stood on her tiptoes and kissed Harry's scar before she said, "That's what I am here for love. I'll work on filling that void if you promise to tell me when you have these nightmares. I want to help you but you have to share with me."

Harry smiled grimly and replied, "I don't know if you want to know my nightmares sweetheart."

Hermione huffed and growled, "You think you are the only one who has nightmares? Try to imagine knowing your boyfriend has a destiny that necessitates he must kill a mad man before he can live the life he deserves. How many times do you think I've had a nightmare where I watched him kill you? How dare you Harry James Potter."

Harry sighed and rubbed at his eyes tiredly before he simply said, "It's not that I don't want to tell you my nightmares Hermione, and it's not that I think I am the only one who has these problems. The reason I haven't said anything is because I've had nightmares as long as I can remember, and no one has ever offered to help me with them before. I know we have each other to help to deal with these things but that is still something I am getting used to I suppose."

Hermione gave Harry an understanding look before she said, "How about this, each morning before we go to breakfast we'll talk about our nightmares and try to help each other move beyond our fears."

Harry gave Hermione a small smile and was about to nod when something happened that hadn't in a very long time. A pain in Harry's head erupted driving him to his knees before he gasped and said, "Oh god, he has Sirius and Remus."

Hermione's hand went to her mouth as tears sprang to her eyes as she dropped to her knees next to Harry and asked, "Are they still alive?"

Harry nodded as he took on a look that Hermione had learned to loath. It was the same look he had in the weeks following Cedric's death. A look of such heart rending sadness that it made her

heartache before he said, "I think the message he sent was pretty clear. When he sends word, he wants me to give him the prophecy without Dumbledore's interference." The sadness in his eyes faded only to be replaced by steely determination as he said, "If he wants the prophecy, he'll get it. But, not before I send him a little message to go with it"

A/N: Well, in short Harry and Co. will make a little trip to the department of mysteries eventually. Voldemort won't go to the ministry until he feels it is the right time (likely when Fudge is finally removed from office, a time when the ministry would be engulfed in chaos making a trip to the ministry much safer for his death eaters). Please review and tell me what you think. The next couple of chapters will be the end of Umbridge, OWL's, Dumbledore's return, and setting the board for a little fight in the Department of Mysteries. **Please review and tell me what you think.**

Chapter 41

The morning following the revelation that Sirius and Remus had been kidnapped led to a few inevitable conclusions. First, Harry hadn't slept at all Thursday night following Astronomy. Perhaps more importantly was the impromptu planning session that had occurred for Harry in lieu of sleep for the night.

By 5 am Harry had made the finishing touches on his master plan for the remainder of the term and decided to get some exercise to wake himself up for the remainder of the day.

As Harry took his laps around the small track in the room of requirement a message from Hedwig was being delivered to a pair of fifth year Slytherin Prefects asking to switching rounds from Friday night to Tuesday night.

After he finished his daily workout, Harry took a nice long shower in the Prefect's bathroom enjoying his last few moments of peace for the long day of scheming ahead. Upon his return to the common room he found Hermione lounging in her favorite chair reading the book on enchanting inanimate objects that Harry had bought earlier in the term.

Harry plopped down on the floor at Hermione's feet and asked, "Hermione, do you want to hear a little plan I came up with last night after Astronomy?"

Hermione lowered her book, arched her eyebrow and replied, "I highly doubt there is anything little about it, especially if you are asking me if I want to hear it."

Harry smiled sheepishly and said, "Well, ok maybe it's not so little. But, I do think you'll want to hear it because I need you for most of it."

Hermione smiled and replied, "No, no Harry you'll need me for all of it."

Harry chuckled and he cheekily retorted, "As you wish mistress." Hermione rolled her eyes before she became all business as Harry

explained his master plan for the remainder of the year. Over the various intricacies of the plan he made Hermione laugh, cry, become so exasperated she tried to leave, and finally marvel at just how perfect it really was.

By the end she replied, "Well, I don't think anyone can ever accuse you of being rash or impetuous about anything ever again." She gave Harry a fond smile before she shook her head as though to remove some stray thought and added, "Let's get some brain food, because I have a feeling we'll need all of the energy we can get today." Harry smiled and nodded before he summoned his book bag from a hiding spot and he took Hermione's hand as they descended down to the great hall.

As the early crowd streamed into the great hall for breakfast Harry made eye contact with a certain fifth year Slytherin and they shared a small nod before a small smile broke out on Harry's face indicating the first part of the plan had went off without a hitch. Harry took his seat next to Hermione and patted her thigh under the table which brought a brief smile to her face, before it was quickly covered with a mask of indifference; the same mask she had practiced frequently throughout the year in the presence of certain individuals.

After a quiet breakfast spent primarily filling their respective faces Harry and Hermione marched their way out towards the exit of the hall but not before seamlessly receiving a clear liquid vial of something, from the same Slytherin that was so important to the beginning of the plan. With his part of the plan coming to a conclusion, he returned to the shadows he had grown so accustomed to living in being an outcast of his own house.

Once Harry and Hermione reached the library they took their customary table towards the back, near the restricted section, and began their OWL reviews in earnest. Harry had wisely included a copious amount of OWL review in his plans to avoid an angry girlfriend and had also probably gained Hermione's full acceptance of the plan as a result.

After several hours of studying in the library Harry stood up and said, "Ok love, we have spent the last 9 hours doing OWL review. Now it's

time for some dinner and then we need to get ready for the slug club meeting tonight.”

Hermione nodded and put all of her notes back into her bag before she took Harry’s offered hand and gingerly stood up arching her back. Harry did the same before they exited the library ready to start the next phase of the master plan.

Harry diverted slightly and made a quick stop at the owlery to give Hedwig a letter that was going to help free Hogwarts of some particularly vile individuals.

Harry arrived down in the great hall to find Hermione in her normal spot awaiting his arrival. As he neared his seat an unwelcome presence slid into his normal spot when McLaggen took the spot and immediately began his attempts on wooing Hermione once again.

McLaggen smirked back at Harry before he turned to Hermione and asked, “Hermione where is your loser of a boyfriend?”

Hermione turned towards McLaggen and gave him her best McGonagall impersonation before she said, “He is standing right behind you. I suggest you let him sit in his normal spot.”

McLaggen dismissively waved his hand and whined as he asked, “Why won’t you just give me a chance?”

Harry laughed out loud before he answered for Hermione, “Listen to you McLaggen. You sound like a child who is being deprived of his favorite toy. Hermione is a wonderful young woman who chooses who she goes out with and isn’t a possession to be owned.”

McLaggen looked to Hermione who merely shook her head at him before he hung his shoulders in defeat, and stood up before he walked to the other end of the table towards a group of fourth year girls he knew thought he was cute.

Harry shook his head in wonder at the moronic sixth year before he sat down next to Hermione and said, “That guy just can’t seem to take a hint can he?”

Hermione took a deep breath and then giggled before she said, "I think he wants me to make the matching set for fifth year girls. He has already been with Lavender and Parvati and that just leaves little old me."

Harry chuckled and replied, "Well personally my dear I think you are way out of his league. Of course you are way out of my league too, but you don't see me complaining about it."

Hermione huffed good-naturedly and replied, "Like you honestly think I would settle for any less than the best." Hermione finished rather haughtily causing Harry to smile which had been her intention in the first place.

After dinner they walked back to the common room to get ready for the slug club meeting on Friday night. As it was Harry and Hermione had to pick up another set of rounds for the following week just to go to the meeting. However, going to Slughorn's club was an important and vital part of the plan as a means of planting some specific information.

As Harry and Hermione reached the dungeon for the slug club meeting, he checked his pocket for the same vial of clear liquid he had procured earlier and upon feeling the smooth glass between his fingers he nodded to himself and they entered Slughorn's office together.

Slughorn immediately greeted his two prized pupils, "Ah Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger how wonderful to see you tonight. I was under the impression that you both had rounds tonight and wouldn't be able to make this week's meeting."

Hermione smiled not even bothering to look at Harry before answering like they had practiced, "We had some important news to share with you and we always enjoy the meetings as a time to relax. We traded rounds with your fifth year Slytherin Prefects so that we could come." Slughorn accepted the answer with glee and had a certain calculating gleam in his eye when Hermione mentioned they had news to share.

They parted company with Slughorn and grabbed their drinks together before going off and finding Mathias and Luna in the corner of the room talking.

Harry and Hermione surrounded their friends and were prepared for the next part of the plan. Harry put his hand on Mathias' shoulder as he glanced between both Mathias and Luna. Hermione cast some privacy charms and a confundus charm before he finally said, "Guys, we need your help with something. But, if you don't want to do it we won't force you to."

Mathias and Luna shared a look before the blonde witch answered for the both of them, "Anything you need Harry and Hermione, we are here for you."

Harry sighed in relief and then manufactured the vial and handed it to Mathias. Upon his friend's startled expression he said, "Yes this is Verisateum. It's slightly altered so any questions asked while under its influence won't be remembered. Dumbledore suggested we ask some specific questions of him. We need you to get this in Slughorn's drink at the end of the night. We have to wait until everyone else is gone and then you guys need to slip this in his drink and leave. We already mentioned that we have some news to share with him and in return we are going to get something much more valuable."

Mathias nodded and asked, "What are you trying to get from him?"

Harry looked long and hard at Hermione as they had a brief mental conversation before he nodded and replied, "At the moment we can't tell you. But, ask us again this summer some time and we'll have a very different answer for you."

Mathias and Luna both nodded before Hermione dropped all of the charms and they parted company to dance to the new Son of a Witch song playing on the WWN. After a couple of hours spent dancing and chatting with various fellow members of the slug club the room started to empty eventually leaving only the four friends and Slughorn left.

Mathias and Luna went over to Slughorn to say their goodbyes and fortunately the potions professor was nursing a butterbeer. Mathias

said something that caused Slughorn to laugh quite loudly. It was certainly a laugh of a man that was at least slightly sloshed and the opening was all Luna needed to slip the potion into the drink. They both said their final farewells and quickly left the room.

Harry and Hermione made their way over to Slughorn and watched as he took a swig of his butterbeer. His eyes glazed over slightly and Harry casually asked, "Did Tom Riddle speak to you about Horcruxes?"

Slughorn unblinkingly answered, "Yes."

Harry and Hermione knew this much to be the truth so Hermione asked, "Do you know of any specific Horcruxes he created?"

Slughorn answered, "Yes."

Harry sighed and asked, "What are the specific Horcruxes you know of?"

Slughorn answered, "He created a diary and also used an old artifact of Ravenclaw."

Harry and Hermione shared a smile knowing at least a little more about the final undiscovered Horcrux. Harry pressed on, "What artifact of Ravenclaw's is it?"

Slughorn blinked once indicating the Verisateum was starting to wear off before he answered, "Ravenclaw's reading glasses."

Harry smiled and looked at his watch and asked, "Professor Slughorn are you alright?"

Slughorn's eyes cleared up before he blinked and asked, "What's that Mr. Potter?"

Harry shared a fake concerned look with Hermione before he said, "I asked if you were alright sir. You appeared to be in a daze there for a moment."

Slughorn shook his head and then smiled and replied, "Of course my boy. I guess I've just drank more tonight than I thought."

Harry nodded and then Hermione smiled sweetly and said, "Professor Slughorn, we wanted to tell you about an attack on a staff member that we overheard being planned."

Slughorn perked up at the potentially juicy piece of information and asked, "What might the specifics of this attack be?"

Harry appeared pained to say it, but he said, "The Weasley twins. They plan on pranking Madam Umbridge outside of her Defense classroom on April first. We didn't hear what exactly they planned on doing but we thought it was our duty as prefects to inform a staff member about it."

Slughorn made the same oily smile he made the first time he saw Harry before he softened and said, "Very good show Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger. The ministry will be fortunate to have such staunch followers of the rules in the future."

Hermione nodded and then hesitantly asked, "Sir, Harry and I have always been close to the Weasley family so we would appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone who you heard this from."

Slughorn smiled sweetly and said, "But of course my dear. Unfortunately such an action puts my position at risk here at the school, you understand. If I do this for you, would it be safe to assume you will come to me if you hear of anything similar in the future?"

Harry and Hermione shared a look and then nodded in agreement. Slughorn appeared almost pleased enough to burst and dismissed them with a warm smile.

As soon as they reached the safety of the hall Hermione cast her usual charms for a private conversation. As they walked back to the Gryffindor common room Harry asked, "So do you think he bought it?"

Hermione giggled, "Of course silly. We should really take some acting classes as good as we were there."

Harry chuckled and replied, "Well you might have the looks to be an actress but it would be a great waste of a wonderful mind."

Hermione smiled and gave Harry a kiss on the cheek before she said, "Keep talking like that and we might have an extended snog break scheduled into our OWL reviews tomorrow."

Harry rubbed his hands together like a cartoon villain before he chuckled and said, "Ah excellent, my plan has worked once again."

Hermione playfully swatted at Harry before she grew somewhat contemplative and said, "We need to get Dumbledore back in the castle soon so we can work on finding the final Horcrux before Voldemort and Nagini."

Harry smiled and replied, "Patience love. With what we found out from Slughorn we are actually ahead in the game. I never would have guessed he knew the specifics of any Horcruxes. But, I guess that means Riddle made them before he left Hogwarts. Anyways, if all goes according to plan Umbridge will be gone by this time next week and with the pressure of her being exposed as a deatheater Fudge will be forced to pardon Dumbledore." Hermione nodded already well aware of the plan but still needing to hear it as though to check it for any possible weaknesses.

The next several days went by quietly as Harry and Hermione were resigned to prefect rounds on Tuesday and OWL reviews all of the time outside of class. The only real enjoyment of the week came when Fred and George were pranking her toadiness. It all led up to Thursday morning, the biggest part of Harry's master plan was set to begin.

As they sat in the great hall during breakfast Harry and Hermione watched as Umbridge began to frantically swat around her face. A moment later Peeves flew through the wall behind her and dropped a dung bomb directly on her head before he laughed and said, "Compliments of your greatest fans."

The entire hall burst into hysterics as they watched Umbridge storm off to her office to get cleaned off before her first class. Harry glanced up at the staff table to see that Slughorn had followed her to warn her of the coming attack and he looked over to the twins and gave them a nod which was met with two matching grins that had both a bit of joy and madness in them from the twins.

Harry and Hermione marched off to the headmaster's office to set the wards in place when they received the signal from their fair feathered friend.

Meanwhile in the Defense classroom Umbridge's day had gotten worse when Horace told her he was informed by anonymous sources of an attempted attack upon her outside of her classroom. Unfortunately, this meant she would be forced to stay in her classroom the entire day until she could have help brought from the ministry. Without a FLOO connection in her office she had been forced to send an owl and that would take a few hours to get to the ministry and a few more to organize a protection detail for her. In the end it was all that Potter brat's fault for getting attacked at the ball. If word hadn't been leaked of the attack upon him and the mudblood she would still have aurors at the school and her plans would have been able to continue.

Little did Umbridge know that by staying in her office she was playing directly into Harry's hand. They had carefully selected the words when addressing the attack upon Umbridge to lead both Slughorn and the toad to believe that if she didn't go out into the hall she would be safe.

After she dismissed her class of snot nosed first year Hufflepuff's and Ravenclaw's she took a deep breath and growled under her breath about how unjust it was that she was hiding from a pair of blood traitors. She filled out the paperwork for expulsion for the pair as she always carried such paperwork in hopes of expelling the mudblood on the drop of a hat. Unfortunately, she hadn't given her a reason yet but the word of a staff member was enough to get rid of the miserable pranksters. With the flight of another owl she let out an evil chuckle that was cut off as she heard the voices of her would be attackers.

Fred and George entered the defense classroom and they spoke in unison, "We are well aware that we have been finked upon and probably expelled. So without further adieu let us unveil our newest product. It comes complete with wildlife. Unfortunately, you have to supply the toad. Weasley's Wizard Wheezes proudly presents the portable swamp."

Fred and George threw a pair of small cubes that upon hitting the ground expanded into a swamp that filled the room isolating Umbridge from her exit. The two pranksters gave Umbridge a pair of one fingered salutes before shutting the door to the classroom behind them and casting a silencing charm outside of the door. With one last touch a note was placed on the door indicating that Umbridge was ill and the plan was prepared to proceed forward.

Fred and George proceeded to pack their belongings before exiting the castle and shooting red sparks up into the sky just as the champion's had been instructed for the third task of the tri-wizard tournament.

As Harry and Hermione watched the telltale sparks shoot into the sky they waited for a moment before Fawkes arrived in the headmaster's office with a flash of fire. Harry walked over to the ward controls for the school and he uttered a long string of Latin which caused one of Dumbledore's small silver instruments to glow blue for a moment. After the glow faded away Harry and Hermione heard a few screams indicating the wards success. Harry and Hermione shared a smile before Hermione took Fawkes tail feather while Harry created a portkey to the edge of the wards of the school.

Harry arrived a moment after Hermione to find Rita and four very green looking ministry aurors binding four various witches and wizards including Umbridge and three seventh year Slytherin's all nude but exposing their dark marks clearly on their left forearms.

Rita smiled and walked over to the couple before she said, "Mr. Potter do you have any comment on today's revelation's that Madam Umbridge is indeed a deatheater along with three other pureblood Slytherin students."

Harry smiled slightly and answered, "Certainly Ms. Skeeter. Today's revelations reveal that Minister Fudge has gravely miscalculated who should be in charge of Hogwarts. If today's events do nothing else they should prove that the only place for Albus Dumbledore is as Headmaster of Hogwarts to protect the children of our world. As I've stated before we have no present without the future." With a wink and a smile Harry reactivated his portkey as Hermione took hold of Fawkes tail feather and they reappeared back in the headmaster's office.

Harry smiled at Fawkes before he handed the phoenix a letter that said:

Papa Phoenix,

Hermione and I have done some necessary spring cleaning at the castle. The school should smell a lot better than when you last visited as the stench of the toad and a few of her young vermin have been removed thanks to our new friend. We look forward to seeing you tomorrow when Fudge will have no other choice after reading the prophet but to exonerate you and rescind his decree removing you as headmaster. We've kept your chair warm for you.

Howler and Athena

As they went to exit the office Hermione suddenly frowned before she asked, "Harry, do you think the twins will come back once Dumbledore repeals their expulsion?"

Harry chuckled and replied, "Honestly? No, I think they've attended their last class at Hogwarts. But, once their shop takes off, like I know it will, their N.E.W.T results will be long forgotten." Hermione nodded grudgingly even though she was mentally wincing at how Molly would react.

Harry smiled as he felt the mental equivalent of a wince through their bond and knowingly said, "Molly can't do anything about it love. They are both of age as of today, and they can make their own decisions like any other adult." Hermione nodded as the gargoyle statue shifted back into place to remain until Dumbledore returned.

They returned to the library content with skipping classes for the day. Harry had initially been surprised that Hermione was willing to skip potions class to pull the ultimate prank on Umbridge, but then he remembered that she was as much a marauder as he was.

After a few more hours of OWL review Hermione gave Harry a mysterious smile before she said, "I think we've studied enough for the day." Harry smiled before she added, "But, we should go to Astronomy tonight."

Harry nodded morosely causing Hermione to giggle before she said, "Trust me Harry I am about to make it up to you."

Harry smiled and asked, "What exactly does this making up involve?"

Hermione blushed prettily and whispered, "It involves you and me and an empty room of requirement."

Harry gulped and before Hermione could blink he had taken care of all of the books and notes and grabbed both bags. Harry smiled nervously and said, "Well should we go then?" Hermione laughed and took his hand as it took all of his self control not to run the entire way with Hermione in tow.

By the time the door to the room of requirement opened Harry had thrown the book bags into the couch he had envisioned and he gently led Hermione to a cozy loveseat. Hermione smiled and pulled Harry into a deep kiss as they explored the other's mouth. Harry was running his hands gently up her back when Hermione broke the kiss and took his hand and ran it under her shirt to lightly cup her breast.

She almost laughed as Harry's eyes grew wide before they glazed over as he felt the lacy fabric of her bra and the warmth of her breast underneath it. They spent the next couple of hours slowly taking their relationship to this next level, as Harry studied her reactions to his gentle groping as though she was the most important thing in the world. Of course Hermione knew that was exactly how he felt about her but she still marveled at just how gentle and sweet he was. He of course reciprocated the gesture and Hermione ran her hands up and down his toned chest feeling as flushed from the experience as Harry was.

By the time they had finished they had gained an even greater appreciation of the other. When they tried to make themselves presentable to limited success before returning to the common room Harry said with a crooked smile Hermione couldn't resist, "You know, we need to find more time for stuff like this."

Hermione smiled wickedly and sultrily whispered into his ear, "You know Mr. Potter, I already told you I would keep you plenty busy. A very large portion of that plan is doing things just like this." Harry audibly gulped which caused her to giggle and straighten her blouse one last time.

The next morning word of Umbridge's exit spread throughout the school thanks to the prophet and Rita Skeeter.

Ministry Appointee Exposed as Deatheater

Yesterday at Hogwarts School and Witchcraft and Wizardry, Harry Potter and his girlfriend Hermione Granger led a successful mission to expose High Inquisitor Delores Umbridge as a deatheater and supporter of he-who-must-not-be-named.

Three other students were also revealed to be deatheaters and it leads this reporter to wonder if Minister Fudge's judgment can be trusted when he appointed a deatheater to the post of head of the primary education institution in all of Europe.

Once again one must wonder; what was the true intent of the minister of removing order of Merlin Recipient Albus Dumbledore from a position he had capably filled for nearly forty years. As a conscientious citizen I must demand that Dumbledore be exonerated of the ridiculous and baseless charges that led to his flight and he be returned to the position where he is needed the most, protecting our future.

When asked for comment on the matter Harry Potter simply said, "As I've stated before, we have no present without the future."

By the end of the day Albus Dumbledore had been cleared by the ministry of any wrongdoing. He was greeted as he entered the great

hall by Harry who simply said, "It's nice to have you back sir. Hogwarts isn't the same without you here."

Dumbledore smiled as his eyes twinkled before he said, "Someday Harry I believe the same will be said for you."

Harry nodded and they parted company. Dumbledore never noticed that the smile Harry had been sporting faded away before he whispered to himself almost desperately, "Hold on Padfoot and Moony."

A/N: It won't be explained in the story but Umbridge will have charges brought against her for her use of a blood quill on Harry and some other students. In addition to her status as a deatheater she will be uncomfortably residing in Azkaban very soon. I thought a naked Umbridge would have been too disturbing to explain in detail but I believe she got her just rewards in the end. In fact, the only people I feel sorry for are Rita and the aurors that had to apprehend her. ***Bad mental image.*** I am sure most of you will think I should have killed Umbridge but for all of her bad actions I didn't really think her deserving of death. **Please review and tell me what you thought of the chapter.**

Chapter 42

It had been two weeks since Dumbledore's return to the castle when Harry and Hermione were finally summoned to speak to the old wizard. The DA had held a short review session, and Harry and Hermione reviewed endlessly for their OWL's taking many snog breaks. Of course when Harry did particularly well in his reviews, Hermione would hold her Room of Requirement breaks, which Harry admittedly couldn't get enough of. Of course Hermione would never admit it, but she enjoyed the breaks as much as Harry.

Dumbledore welcomed them into his office and with a warm smile he gestured them to a pair of seats in front of his desk. He peered down his glasses before he asked, "Harry, Hermione am I to assume you have both been informed that Remus and Sirius have been taken captive?"

Harry sighed and replied, "Yes Albus we have heard as much."

Dumbledore nodded before pulling out a lemon drop from a bowl on his desk and sucking on it in contemplation. He smiled and said, "Oh dear, where are my manners? Could I interest either of you in a lemon drop?" Harry and Hermione declined before the old wizard continued, "I must recommend that any rescue missions the order attempts, be expressly without your presences."

Upon receiving no response he continued, "I have also brought you both here today to discuss the next step in determining the last horcrux."

Hermione smiled and said, "Sir, we did as you asked with Professor Slughorn, and we have determined the identity of the last unknown horcrux."

Dumbledore perked up and asked, "May I inquire as to what it is?"

Hermione glanced at Harry who gave her a small smile not trusting his voice after hearing about Remus and Sirius. She replied, "The final horcrux is a set of Rowena Ravenclaw's reading glasses."

Dumbledore steepled his fingers as he slowly sucked on his lemon drop. He finally said, "That is most welcome news I must admit. As an artifact of the founders there are ways to track it to its location. Unfortunately, this will take a considerable amount of time to organize. For now we have other pressing matters to deal with. Namely we must make a trip down to Salazar's chamber to look for anything of interest as well as to procure some necessary ingredients in our quest." Harry and Hermione nodded before they followed the headmaster out of his office and down towards Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

When they reached the entrance to the Chamber Dumbledore smiled almost sheepishly before he asked, "Harry, if you would do the honors for us?"

Harry smiled, suddenly realizing he was the only person present who had actually ventured down into the chamber. He smiled at the Hermione and the headmaster before he hissed something in Parseltongue, and the entrance to the chamber slid open much like it had three years earlier.

Harry put his wands back into the holsters before he walked up to the opening and said, "Watch out for the first step." Harry then jumped into the opening and slid and tumbled out of the hole after a few harried seconds.

A moment later Hermione tumbled out but Harry saved her from his fate by casting *wingardium leviosa* on his girlfriend. She smiled when he let her down and gave him a peck on the cheek before she said, "So you, Ron, and Lockhart did this three years ago, eh love?"

Harry nodded as Dumbledore tumbled down but somehow managed to land on his feet spryly like a very old but spry cat. Harry chuckled and then asked, "Are you ok sir?" Dumbledore merely nodded with an excited expression on his face.

Harry led them down the short corridor until they reached the rock filled entryway. Dumbledore merely smiled and waved his wand wordlessly. The pile of rocks was soon cleared and Harry asked, "Sir, what spell did you use there?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry and Hermione with a twinkle in his eyes before he said, "I believe that will be better answered this summer when we do our training." With a wink Dumbledore's wand shifted into a long and elegant staff before he motioned for Harry to lead the way.

Hermione and Dumbledore followed Harry as he led them through a dark and damp hallway carved into the rock below the castle. When they reached the large metal door adorned with snakes Harry turned and said, "I want you both to be prepared for what you are about to see. The basilisk was quite large and its eyes have been ripped out by Fawkes. Its corpse should be in the back of the chamber if I remember correctly." Dumbledore and Hermione nodded as Hermione took Harry's hand into her own before he gave her a grateful smile, and hissed something in Parseltongue causing the great metal doors to slide open revealing the chamber of secrets in all of its perverse glory; much as Harry had left it three years earlier.

Harry hesitantly entered the chamber and had to pull on Hermione's hand to get her to enter as well. Harry asked, "What's wrong love?"

Hermione's eyes were half lidded and she was breathing erratically before Harry gently shook her shoulders and her eyes snapped open. She frowned with her eyes watering and said, "T-the last time I saw the basilisk I almost died Harry. I had nightmares for months about those yellow eyes I saw in the mirror."

Harry wrapped her up into a hug and said, "If it makes you feel any better love, I almost died the last time I saw the thing too." Hermione snorted as her sniffles began subside.

Hermione finally said, "That really didn't help at all Harry, but thank you for the effort. I guess we'll just have to be scared together." Harry nodded and they walked together deep into the chamber, following well behind Dumbledore, in no particular hurry to see the great beast that had almost killed the both of them three years earlier.

They both walked around a great puddle near where Harry had saved Ginny before the Basilisk corpse came into view. Hermione gasped and buried her head into Harry's shoulder before she whimpered, "How did you kill that thing?"

Harry chuckled as he rubbed her back and said, "If you were there, you would have seen it was all done very poorly. In fact, I'll show you in a pensieve later ok?" Hermione nodded and they approached Dumbledore, who was well on his way to procuring all of the potion ingredients and Horcrux destruction ingredients that he could.

Harry looked around the chamber and saw a small door he hadn't noticed the first time. He nodded in the direction of the door and Hermione's eyes widened before she spoke to Dumbledore, "Headmaster, Harry found a door to another room. Would you come and check it for any curses or jinxes?" Dumbledore stood and quickly ran over to the door and waved his wand a few times each time a blue glow came over the door.

Dumbledore smiled and said, "It is safe to open the door. Do not grab anything without asking me first, is that understood?" Harry and Hermione nodded and with a whispered *Alohomora* the ancient door creaked open revealing a small room that was likely Salazar Slytherin's study down in the chamber.

The three entered the small room and Hermione gasped at some of the ancient texts that were still in perfect condition sitting on the book shelf. Dumbledore also looked very interested in several volumes as Harry approached the small desk. He tentatively opened the top drawer and there sat a small journal that said on the cover, *Parselmouth Magic*. Harry motioned for Dumbledore and with a few waves of his wand he allowed Harry to pick the book up. Dumbledore conjured a box and carefully placed each of the books into it while allowing Harry and Hermione to take a couple of volumes for later reading themselves. Dumbledore combed over the room extreme caution searching for anymore hidden magic before they packed the entire room up for safekeeping and for historic purposes.

As they exited Slytherin's study Harry said, "You know, not a single one of those books have anything that I consider to be dark magic in them. Sure some people might consider the Parselmouth magic somehow dark, but that is more because of the people who have had the ability, then the ability itself. It makes me wonder if Slytherin wasn't just a misguided racist and history remembered him as much worse."

Dumbledore and Hermione nodded thoughtfully before Dumbledore sealed the door to the study and walked back over to the remnants of the Basilisk carcass. Dumbledore asked the question that had been driving him crazy since he saw the dead beast, "Harry, I understand how you killed the Basilisk. But, what I would like to know is how you used the sword of Godric to kill it, especially considering you had no prior training in the use of the sword?"

Harry sighed and said, "I already told Hermione that I would put the memory of my time in the chamber in a pensieve for her. I assume we could move the setting to your office, and then watch it when we get back. It's not something I like to think about too much, but I imagine I can relive it one more time for posterity's sake." Dumbledore smiled and nodded respectfully before he gathered all of the various Basilisk parts for later use and he banished the remainder of the carcass with a flick of his wand.

As they exited the chamber once again thanks to Fawkes aid, the three reached the entrance in Myrtle's bathroom. Dumbledore looked at Harry and Hermione before he said, "I believe it would be to our benefit to put the chamber under a *fidelus* charm. There is little to be gained from having an underground chamber that only Tom and Harry can reach, and there is much more to be lost if the former finds it." Harry and Hermione nodded before Dumbledore took a deep breath and incanted *Fidelus Memoria Chamber*. The entrance flashed blue before vanishing from sight. Harry and Hermione suddenly looked extremely confused momentarily before Dumbledore passed them a slip of paper that simply read: *The Entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is found in Myrtle's Bathroom*. Comprehension dawned upon Harry and Hermione's faces before they quietly left the chamber, the three having spent several hours getting everything they needed.

The trip back to the headmaster's office was spent in quiet contemplation. It was nearly midnight so the hallways of Hogwarts were empty, so they needn't worry about running into anyone and awkward questions that would follow.

They climbed the stairs up to Dumbledore's office and after placing the various books and Basilisk parts away, Harry moved over to

Dumbledore's pensieve and pulled the ethereal strand from his head before dunking it in the bowl.

Hermione and Dumbledore walked over to Harry and they linked hands before all three went into the memory of a rather traumatic memory from Harry's life.

They entered the chamber of the secrets for the second time in 24 hours although this time it was considerably more dangerous than the first. They watched as Lockhart's spell backfired and Hermione had the good graces to look embarrassed, although Harry didn't rub it in any more than he had in the past.

Dumbledore was fascinated that a second year student like Harry could be as resourceful and aware of his circumstances as he was. He then watched in rapt fascination mixed with some disgust as the same Tom Riddle that he had taught over fifty years earlier; simply appeared next to Harry and carried on a conversation before revealing his true identity as Voldemort.

Hermione began to tremble when Riddle's imprint summoned the basilisk as Harry stood over Ginny's limp body. She wrapped her arms firmly around Harry as she watched his 12-year-old counterpart receive the sword of his ancestor from the sorting hat. She slowly settled down and calmly watched Harry in his element, even if he would never admit to being a hero. Dumbledore joined them and said, "Harry, I had no idea it was like this. If you had told me I would have started your training earlier and probably removed you from the Dursley's despite the blood wards in place. The way you described the events in the chamber, you made it sound like you had gotten very lucky. But, I see now that you downplayed how the events transpired."

They all winced when Harry was bitten by the basilisk and killed the beast in one swift movement. Harry spoke as he plunged the fang into the diary slowly dying but refusing to submit to defeat despite that, "I learned at a young age that by downplaying my abilities it was harder to be recognized. The Dursley's beat that lesson in to me when I got better grades than Dudley in the second grade."

Dumbledore paled and he weakly said, "I am truly sorry my boy." Harry shook his head dismissively having long ago put the issue to bed; although by appearances Dumbledore truly realized for the first time just how bad it was for Harry growing up.

Upon pulling themselves out of the memory Dumbledore took his seat behind the desk and motioned Harry and Hermione to sit at their typical chairs in front of him.

Harry spoke first, "I really don't want to talk anymore about the Dursley's sir. I've made my peace with that part of my life, and frankly any of your apologies at this point will fall upon deaf ears."

Dumbledore opened his mouth to reply but no sound came out when he did. Hermione sensing the Headmaster's discomfort spoke, "Sir, Harry and I are going to grab some books for research and we'll return them when we have finished with them. We really need to get some sleep because we have a Hogsmeade trip in about nine hours." Dumbledore merely nodded not trusting his own voice and watched as Harry grabbed his book on Parselmouth magic and an additional book written by Godric Gryffindor on the art of swordplay. Hermione grabbed a couple of books written by Ravenclaw on spell creation and Arithmancy.

As they exited Dumbledore's office if either noticed they didn't say as Dumbledore began to weep at his own foolishness.

By the time they returned to the common room Hermione realized that whenever the topic of the Dursley's came up to Harry he immediately shut down in response. Desperate to get him to speak Hermione grabbed Harry's face and pulled him into a deep kiss. When she broke the kiss she poked her finger into his chest and said, "Harry, I'm not asking you to discuss your time with the Dursley's; but, please don't shut down your emotions whenever they are brought up. You deserve to feel angry or sad about them, and no one will think any less of you for it, I promise." Harry bowed his head in response and remained silent.

Harry took a deep breath and shocked Hermione when he tilted his head back up and tears were trickling down his cheeks. Hermione pulled him into a hug and ran her hands through his hair gently. Harry

finally said, "Thank you for being you Hermione. Every day I realize just how much you mean to me, and every day I realize it is a little more than the previous day. Admittedly, you mean the world to me love."

Hermione smiled softly and kissed his scar before she said, "I love you Harry, and this is how people who love each other act. Like I said I am never going to ask you about it but when you need a shoulder to cry on I am always here; ok baby?" Harry nodded before he stood up from his position on the ground and helped Hermione up from the couch. He gave her a tender kiss before wrapping her into a tight hug.

As he broke the hug he whispered into Hermione's ear, "Tomorrow, we are going to have a quiet day together in Hogsmeade, ok love?" Hermione nodded and he gave her one last kiss before heading up the stairs to the fifth year boy's dormitory.

He never saw Hermione break into a wide grin and give out a relieved breath when he finally vanished from sight. As she slowly made her way up to bed only one thought echoed in her mind, "*Finally, he can start to heal now.*"

The next morning brought a quiet breakfast of reading their new books, before the final Hogsmeade trip of the month. Harry and Hermione boarded one of the first carriages and held hands and cuddled as they waited for the short trip from the castle to the village to begin.

They were joined by a group of fourth year Hufflepuff girls who were watching Harry longingly as he cuddled with Hermione and his arms were draped protectively around her waist as she leaned against his chest. Hermione finally grew tired of the giggles and staring so she said, "Listen girls, if you are going to act stupid at least do so quietly." The remainder of the trip, the stares didn't cease, but the giggles did much to Harry and Hermione's relief.

As they entered the village Hermione immediately dragged Harry to Dervish and Banges for a new type of sneakoscope that had been developed. This new sneakoscope lit up into different colors depending upon the threat. It would glow blue if someone was lying about something, red if someone wanted to physically harm you, and

the new feature was that it would glow green in the presence of the dark mark. Hermione and Harry each bought one and they were happy to see it didn't react to their DA coins any.

After some gentle prodding, Harry convinced Hermione to go into Honeyduke's to pick up some treats for the remainder of the year. Harry bought Hermione some sugar quills as he got himself some chocolate frogs to be used as rewards for correct answers when reviewing for their OWL's.

After a short stay in the book store they ultimately decided to relax at the Three Broomsticks instead of the romantic backdrop of Madam Puddifoot's. Harry opened the door for Hermione and they found an empty booth and took their seats. After a few moments of holding hands underneath the table Madam Rosmerta came over with a smile on her face.

Rosmerta smiled and said, "Ah two of my favorite customers. What can I start you both with today?"

Harry replied, "I'll have a butterbeer and Hermione will have..."

Hermione answered with a smile, "I'll have one of your iced Cherry syrups."

Rosmerta smiled and walked away as Harry gave Hermione a strange look before he asked, "So, decided to try something new today?"

Hermione smiled and replied sweetly, "I just wanted to try something new is that ok?" Harry merely smiled and nodded as he squeezed her hand which was now resting on the table.

Little did they know that an agent for the ministry had immediately ran over to the public FLOO connection upon their entrance; and he made an emergency firecall informing the minister that Harry Potter had just entered the Three Broomsticks.

Within five minutes Minister Fudge and four ministry aurors had arrived via the FLOO into the Three Broomsticks in a last ditch effort to save the fool's position by discrediting Harry once and for all on

some trumped up charges. Of course no one could ever accuse Fudge of being terribly smart, but he was manipulative which made him a good politician if not a good leader.

Harry had assumed Fudge would make a last ditch effort to discredit himself or Dumbledore once again, but he did not think Fudge would do it in such a direct way. As Harry and Hermione were sharing a laugh while enjoying their drinks Fudge and his auror squad purposefully marched over to their booth.

Harry caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and immediately rolled the very same eyes before he motioned to the fools with his head to Hermione. Hermione let out a frustrated sigh before she turned as Harry did and they manufactured their wands into a ready position from their wrist holsters.

The aurors all raised their wands to attack before Fudge said, "Mr. Harry James Potter you are wanted for questioning in regards to an attack upon Madam Umbridge while she was still a ministry official. What say you?"

Harry chuckled and replied, "Minister Fudge, you can not seriously think that trying to arrest me on charges of attacking a known deatheater would stand?"

Fudge smirked evilly and retorted, "Just watch me try Mr. Potter. Auror Dawlish, arrest that boy."

Harry arched his eyebrow as the auror took a tentative step forward before he stopped and said, "Sir, it is part of my oath when I join the auror forces to uphold the ideals of justice. By arresting Mr. Potter I would be breaking that oath."

Fudge looked incredulously at Dawlish before he coolly said, "Very well Auror Dawlish, you are fired." He then looked at the other three aurors and said, "Does anyone else have similar issues?" The other aurors nodded and took their places next to Dawlish. Dawlish let out a sigh of relief and he was bolstered by their support, and he visibly straightened his posture standing much taller and more confidently. Soon the other patrons of the bar were standing behind the aurors showing their support of Harry. The majority of the members of the

DA made their presence known as they stood proudly next to their leader in a time of need.

Fudge huffed once at seeing this was not going how he had planned before he became so desperate he raised his own wand but stopped at the look on Harry's face. Harry simply said, "This is the last straw Fudge. I've given you several opportunities to change your ways and yet you still insist on pushing your policy and ambitions in front of your followers' welfare. I can assure you that a vote of no-confidence will be before your desk tomorrow morning once I have talked to my sources at the Prophet. I suggest you make arrangements for being unemployed this afternoon at the latest."

Fudge actually had a small temper tantrum, complete with sitting on the ground and kicking his feet, before he scurried over to the FLOO connection and returned to his office to clean it out. The ministry aurors offered their apologies to the crowd and Harry before returning to their own offices at the ministry. Harry let out a sigh and the commotion soon died down. Rosmerta came over to their booth to give them some refills and Harry politely asked for a piece of parchment and quill.

Hermione smiled slightly and asked, "So is that for Rita then?"

Harry nodded and replied, "Yes I imagine I'll describe what I saw in the letter and she can get some corroborative witnesses if she visits here later." Hermione nodded as they relaxed once again and spent the rest of the afternoon sipping on their drinks and talking about life.

Rita was up to the task as always and upon receiving Harry's owl she sprang into action and took the FLOO to the Three Broomsticks and interviewed Rosmerta and a few other customers that had witnessed the attempted arrest.

The next morning the Sunday edition of the prophet arrived to a sparse crowd in the great hall. Harry and Hermione both shared satisfied smiles upon reading the front page article.

Minister Fudge Resigns from Office Following Botched Arrest Attempt on Harry Potter

By: Rita Skeeter

Minister Cornelius Fudge resigned yesterday afternoon following a bogus attempt at arresting the boy-who-lived on charges that he attacked known deatheater Delores Umbridge. Ministry aurors refused to carry out the order which led to a public temper tantrum by Fudge.

Two hours following the tantrum Fudge resigned before a vote of no confidence could be organized as would have been the case. Fudge's tenure had been filled with questionable policy since the reported return of he-who-must-not-be-named.

Candidates for the new Minster of Magic will be forwarded by nomination for the next week until the Wizengamot will convene to organize a vote for the position. All Wizengamot members as well as leader's of Ministry mandated old families are awarded a vote. This reporter prays a leader will be voted into office, which will be prepared for a war against you-know-who. The vote for this leader will be the most important appointment to the position since the last goblin war.

Dumbledore slowly approached the Gryffindor table and he was sporting a very large grin which was mostly concealed by his beard. He warmly asked, "Harry my boy, can you ever just have a normal day?"

Harry smirked and said, "Oh you know, I guess there weren't any rogue dragons in town yesterday so Fudge had to pull his big bad minister routine. I might have impressed upon him that it would be in his best interest to run while he still could."

Dumbledore chuckled and said, "While I am an admitted fan of your form of entertainment, the end result is going to have me out of the castle most of this week working on the nomination and voting processes. Since you technically have two votes for the new minister I guess I will have to write you up a permission slip of some sort when the final candidates are announced. For now I recommend you keep up the good work in classes and remember to review for your OWL's."

Hermione linked her arm to Harry's and said, "Trust me professor I'll keep Harry plenty busy the remainder of the term."

Dumbledore chuckled and as he began to turn he mirthfully said, "Of that, I have no doubt Ms. Granger."

A/N: Please review and tell me what you thought of Minister Fudge's resignation dance. Next chapter we have the appointment of a new Minister of Magic and some Voldemort Mayhem. Review and give me your best guess for the new Minister and if you get it right I'll tell you. Thanks for reading and keep up the great reviews.

Chapter 43

The actions of Harry Potter had created a vacuum in the power structure at the ministry. While the individual departments continued to operate independent of the presence of a Minister of Magic, there were several problems beginning to unfold. However, since there was no cooperation between the various departments it led to several incidents falling through the cracks that otherwise would have been dealt with.

In fact if Voldemort himself walked into the offices of the regulation of magical creatures, the MLE would most likely not hear about it until it was far too late to do anything about it; a fact that Voldemort was extremely aware of. However, Voldemort couldn't risk facing Potter and Dumbledore at the same time, and hope to succeed in obtaining the prophecy. He had to plan carefully, and create a distraction large enough to pull Dumbledore away from the castle; where he could watch Potter, and keep him away for long enough that Potter would walk into his trap in order to save his precious mutts.

Meanwhile back at Hogwarts, Harry and Hermione found themselves in their normal spot of the library. They had just finished a review on the material for History of Magic when Harry quietly asked, "Do you think Remus and Sirius are ok?"

Hermione sucked in a deep breath definitely not expecting a comment so similar to what she had been agonizing over, since she first heard of their capture. She finally looked into Harry's deep green eyes and honestly replied, "I want to tell you they are ok Harry, but I can't. Voldemort doesn't treat prisoners of war with care and sympathy as we do." Her eyes filled with tears and she continued, "Most likely they have been tortured, starved, and beaten to within an inch of death. When the time comes for Riddle to call upon you, they will still be alive. I can only assume he wants you to get him the prophecy in exchange for their lives. That's the only thing that makes any sense in all of this."

Harry nodded and gave out an anguished sigh before he said, "I also assumed as much. It's just hard to think that my only remaining real family is being tortured Merlin knows where, and I can't help them."

Hermione stood up from her seat and wrapped her arms around Harry before she said, "We'll get them back Harry. We just have to wait for the right time." Harry nodded into her shoulder as she held Harry as though her very life depended upon it.

Monday night finally signaled the first official meeting for S.P.E.W in the room of requirement. Hermione had planned on having a meeting sometime following the ball, but with everything that happened it was pushed back.

Hermione spent the entire day a nervous wreck as she realized her own personal crusade wouldn't succeed if people didn't show up at the meeting. Harry was constantly reassuring her that at least six people would be at the meeting.

Hermione stood at the entrance of the room and watched as nearly twenty students showed up to the meeting much to her relief. She at least wanted an opportunity to get her message out and if they didn't agree with it she would live with that.

Hermione nervously stood around the large round table that the room had provided and said, "Thank you all for coming to the first ever meeting of S.P.E.W, or the society for the promotion of house elf welfare. The primary goal of the society is to bring about improvements for house elf conditions and eventually the freedom of the elves from the shackles of slavery that wizardkind have held the gentle creatures in for far too long."

Harry added from his seat, "My godfather and I have two house elves that are bonded to us and also receive a weekly paycheck. They are both very happy with their current position and have expressed this to me on several occasions."

The group all nodded at Harry's statement and Hermione beamed before she added, "I've done a considerable amount of research as to the history of house elves and how they have been shackled into a life of servitude."

Hannah Abbot politely asked, "Could you share the story with us?"

Hermione smiled and said, "Yes I would love to." She took a deep breath and Harry gave her hand a small squeeze to show his support before she said, "House elves didn't always exist as they are currently known. They have always been recorded as being domestic help although several have existed outside of this realm. They once had a royal family much like the Goblins do now. They were never slaves until nearly three hundred years following the founding of this school. A few of you might realize that a massive war between the goblins and witches and wizards at roughly this time. The elves were approached by each side as a means of aid. Unfortunately, the elves decided to side with the goblins. Eventually, the witches and wizards won the war and at a terrible price to the elves. The goblins negotiated for both the elves and themselves and cut a deal to place the elves in a form of servitude. So, in truth the goblins are to blame for the current plight of house elves."

Mathias asked, "So how can we change something that has been in place for so long?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "It's not going to be easy. In fact we need to take several small steps before we can reach the end goal. These pamphlets outline our goals." Hermione passed the pamphlets around and waited until everyone had a copy before she continued, "First, we wish to move in the direction that Harry has arranged with his elves. In fact, our biggest obstacle to attaining our goal is from the elves. They don't understand that they were once free beings and only because of some shady dealings by goblins were they forced into an existence of servitude. Once they can accept this truth then we can move for the treaty to be voided and with Ministry and Goblin nation help return the elves to their former prominence."

After several more minutes of questions Hermione decided to move the meeting forward, "In order to achieve our goals we need to raise funds for the organization. This summer I want each of you that wish to continue in the group to ask for donations for our group and hand out as many pamphlets as you can. We need to spread our message and set up an infrastructure if we really want to make a difference. Harry has already set up a small vault in Gringott's with sufficient start

up money so that we can function for the next year. We need to fundraise if we want to make this a viable long term project.”

Neville timidly raised his hand and asked, “Do you think it’s wise to start something like this right now. I mean whether or not we like to admit it, we are in the beginning of what is going to be a very long war. Shouldn’t we be focusing on that and nothing else?”

Hermione prepared for such a comment, merely smiled and replied, “St. Mungo’s was founded in a time of war. So, just because we are at war doesn’t mean we can’t effect some positive social changes at the same time.” Little did Hermione or anyone else know just how prophetic her words would be later in the week.

With the absence of Umbridge in the castle an auror was brought in to teach the remainder of the terms classes for DADA. Dumbledore likely would have filled the position except that in the time of turmoil he was needed for his leadership as the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. To Harry’s delight and consternation, the auror assigned to teach the DADA class was Tonks; because she would be able to relate to the students easiest due to her own relative young age.

The reason for Harry’s consternation was that Tonks had grown quite despondent following Remus’ capture, and she was in no real state to teach classes. Fortunately, Harry had a talk with her following class on Monday, which ultimately seemed to change things for the young auror.

As she listlessly dismissed the class Harry and Hermione stayed behind. Harry went up to her and asked, “Tonks how are you holding up?”

Tonks looked at Harry with wide and vulnerable eyes before she wrapped her arms around him and sobbed into his shoulder. Harry gently held her before he tears finally subsided and she said, “I miss him so much Harry.”

Harry smiled and gave her a kiss on the forehead before he said, “Tonks I miss both of them a lot too. But, if we stop living our lives

while they are held captive then we will be doing a great disservice to ourselves and them.”

Tonks pulled away with a puzzled expression on her face before she asked, “Cor Harry, what do you mean?”

Harry smiled gently and led Tonks to a seat next to Hermione before he said, “If you think about it, I believe you know the answer to your own question. But, for the sake of saving time I will explain.” Hermione smiled as once again Harry appeared to be channeling Dumbledore and yet wasn’t. It was almost as though Harry had begun to finally understand who he was and the consequences of his actions and others. It was a calm that generally only the old and wise possessed but Harry had gained it himself.

He finally said, “If we stop living our lives than Voldemort has won far more than the capture of Remus and Sirius. He has won because he has terrorized us into a form of unwilling submission, fear. Fear of a name, fear of a shadow, and fear of a stain upon humanity itself. We live not because we don’t miss those that we love, but because if we do then we forget why they decided to fight evil in the first place. They aren’t dead Tonks, and I promise I will do everything I can to bring them back alive. Not simply because I miss them, although I do; it’s because it is the right thing to do, and evil cowers in the face of such a choice. I’ve learned that lesson the hard way and I don’t intend on forgetting it.”

Harry stood and slowly walked out of the classroom and Hermione gave Tonks a small smile and nod before she scurried to catch him before he had left the room. As Hermione took Harry’s hand in her own neither noticed as the young auror in the front of the room had taken on a determined look before she stood from her seat and with purpose proceeded into her office to prepare her students for the war ahead.

Wednesday morning the Prophet arrived along with a small letter for Harry. Putting the letter aside for the moment Harry and Hermione read the headline from the Prophet.

Final Candidates for Minister of Magic named after Long Nomination Process

By: Penelope Clearwater

After a record breaking nomination process in which over 40 candidates were weeded through. The final five candidates for the position of minister of magic have been named. Amongst the candidates are several ministry employees. The candidates include Amelia Bones current head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Amos Diggory head of the Department for the Regulation and Control and Magical Creatures, Rufus Scrimgeour current head of the Auror office, Griselda Marchbanks elder of the Wizengamot and head of the Wizarding Examinations Authority, and Dmitri Carrows longtime contributor to charitable causes and founder of the now ministry run Carrows Magical Orphanage.

Each candidate will be involved in a public debate to be held on the main floor of the Wizengamot Thursday night at 8 pm. Questions will be welcomed from the public and will aid in the decision making process.

The final step to determining the new Minister of Magic will be the formal vote on the main floor of the Wizengamot to be held Friday morning, with the inauguration of the new minister to be held Sunday.

Harry shared a look with Hermione before her eyes lit up and she said, "Harry, remember last year when Dumbledore was showing you the various deatheater trials in his pensieve?" Harry nodded and she continued, "One of the families suspected of being deatheaters but never convicted were the Carrows."

Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes tiredly before he spied the small letter and said, "I'd imagine this is from Dumbledore warning me of the same thing. Seeing as how I hold two votes I guess it's important that I know that." Hermione nodded before she scooted closer to Harry and asked, "Who do you plan on voting for?"

Harry smiled as her breath tickled his ear, before she pulled away and he said, "Well I can safely say that four of the candidates would do a good job. But, I think if you really thought about who would be the leader the ministry needed, you could guess who my votes are going to."

Hermione gave Harry a playful scowl and then began ticking off the candidates in her head. She weighed the pros and cons of each candidate and found that like Harry said, only one was actually the candidate that the ministry needed. The ministry needed a cordial leader who could stick to their principles and could rule with a firm hand when it was necessary.

Harry opened the small letter and it read much as he expected it to.

Harry,

I hope this letter finds you and the castle well. I am writing to inform you of the candidates for the position of Minister of Magic. Each has a short story that I must tell you so that your votes can be well spent.

Amelia Bones is a prospective order member, sympathetic to our cause, and she is head of the MLE. She is very proficient at her current position. She was once an auror and understands the best means to deal with deatheaters and Voldemort.

Amos Diggory is an order member as you well know. I believe you know enough of him to make your own conclusions.

Rufus Scrimgeour is the head of the auror division and while he is an excellent tactician, he lacks the foresight necessary in my opinion to effectively unite and lead the ministry. He would be best suited to continue as head of the aurors because their training is of vital necessity.

Griselda Marchbanks is an old friend of mine and a very wise witch. She much like you has friends amongst the goblins and perhaps only behind you is held highest in their esteem.

Dmitri Carrows as you may already remember was a suspected deatheater that Severus has informed me is Tom's public hand now that Lucius Malfoy is a wanted man.

I already suspect you have chosen you wish to vote for but I believe you deserved to have the added input I can provide. I have sent an additional letter to Minerva in my stead giving both you and Ms.

*Granger permission to take my FLOO connection to the ministry
Friday morning.*

Albus

Harry passed the letter to Hermione who upon finishing the letter she gave Harry a reassuring smile and the continued their breakfast discussing their Arithmancy homework.

Friday morning arrived and after a small breakfast Harry and Hermione arrived in the headmaster's office for the election of the new minister of magic. Hermione had convinced Harry to wear a nice set of dress robes with the Potter family seal on them and she had dressed in a simple set of emerald green dress robes with the same emerald necklace Harry had given her on St. Valentine's Day.

They arrived in the lobby on the ministry in a public FLOO connection and could already see how much of a circus it was going to be today. They reached the wand checkpoint on the way to the main floor of the Wizengamot.

The non-descript wizard didn't even look up as he asked for their wands. Harry and Hermione both handed over their wands, not bothering to mention they carried a second wand at all times. After their identities were confirmed the now somewhat start struck ministry employee tried to strike up a conversation which Harry merely dismissed once again disgusted at what celebrity did to some people.

When they reached their destination a contingent of aurors eyed Harry and Hermione speculatively before an arched eyebrow from Harry caused them to make way. When they reached the main floor Dumbledore gave them a smile and wave and motioned them in the direction of seats for those voting. The voting would consist of old family heads of house and all of the Wizengamot members. In all there were one hundred announced votes to be counted, and Harry controlled two of them.

Eventually the room was filled with people and the doors were closed. Dumbledore stood and spoke, "I now bring into session the voting for the Minister of Magic. We must now do a count of those here to vote

today. If you hold more than one vote please announce this when addressed and then proceed to the front to cast your ballots.”

Harry was given a ballot as were all of the other voters. Harry patiently waited with Hermione as he whispered into her ear, “So, do you have plans tonight my dear lady?”

Hermione giggled and whispered back into his ear, “I believe I have prefect rounds and a boyfriend to snog. Aside from that, no I don’t have any plans.” Harry chuckled and tickled lightly causing her to blush slightly.

Little did anyone in the room know, but Voldemort had organized a massive attack upon St. Mungo’s, that had coincided with the time of the vote.

When Harry finally was called upon to vote he stood before Dumbledore who asked, “Who do you vote for?”

Harry smiled and replied, “I vote on behalf of the houses of Potter and Gryffindor.” Several surprised shouts and gasps rippled through the room before Dumbledore winked and Harry cast both of his votes for Amos Diggory.

When the voting finally concluded the entire crowd watched as the Wizengamot court scribe counted out the votes.

With the votes finally counted Dumbledore stood and with a smile said, “It is my pleasure to announce the next Minister of Magic as Mr. Amos Diggory who had forty-six votes, Mr. Dmitri Carrows had thirty-two votes, Madam Amelia Bones had twelve votes, Mr. Rufus Scrimgeour with six votes, and Madam Griselda Marchbanks with four votes.” The inhabitants of the room stood and clapped for Amos as he stepped forward and was granted the floor.

The ruddy faced man with the brown beard who had just been named Minister of Magic stepped forward and took the floor as was his right. Amos glanced at Harry and gave him a small nod before he spoke, “Today the people in this room showed their courage and elected me to the honored position of Minister of Magic. I live by a mantra a few wise individuals I know have said in the past. In order for you all to

understand what the ministry' role in the war will be I believe I should share it with you. The time has come when we must decide if we will do what is easy or what is right. A war is upon us make no mistake of that. With this vote the ministry will spearhead this effort from this moment forward. Thank you for your confidence."

As the doors to the chamber were opened frantic screams were heard from outside. Harry and Hermione shared a look and pushed their way to the door to find several individuals bloodied and frantically looking for help. Dumbledore somehow appeared next to them and they found one man who screamed, "You-know-who has taken St. Mungo's and destroyed it. They've killed everyone."

Harry and Hermione winced upon hearing the man speak, and they shared a look before turning to Dumbledore as Hermione said, "We need to go there sir. If we can save anyone it will be worth it." Dumbledore was in full agreement as the three most powerful individuals on the side of the light vanished, thanks to a portkey the headmaster had created.

When they arrived at St. Mungo's they realized that the once great hospital that served the various maladies of the Wizarding world had truly been destroyed. The structure still stood but the remnants of the building still reeked of death. Harry and Hermione pulled out their sneakoscopes and didn't detect the presence of any deatheaters so they tentatively entered the building with Dumbledore following close behind. As they searched the building several tell tale pops signifying the incoming apparition of ministry wizards, namely aurors punctuated the haunting quiet of the morning.

With each passing moment and spotted corpse a feeling of unspeakable revulsion dread and anger began to seep into Harry, Hermione, and Dumbledore. They reached the fourth floor which was for victims of spell damage and realized there were three people they knew of on the floor causing each of them to shudder in anticipation of what was to come.

They walked inside and the sights that greeted them would stick with each of them for the rest of their lives. Each body had been completely mutilated unlike the rest of the hospital where the dead

were simply left like so many other victims of the killing curse staring blankly off into space.

They came upon Gilderoy Lockhart, or what remained of him. His hair was left perfect as he always had it but his body had been completely dismantled. Despite what he had tried to do to Harry in second year Harry knew that no one deserved what he had gotten. They continued on as Harry had a feeling of dread come upon him, realizing the Longbottom's beds remained in the hospital.

When they reached the end of the wing for the patients who had been there the longest they found a pair of empty beds. But, written in blood above the beds it simply said, "***The Phoenix will learn to fear the dark.***" It was a fairly obvious threat and what with the absence of the Longbottom's they all knew that Voldemort had won this round of the war and with devastating consequences. Harry couldn't help but wonder if the same thing wouldn't have happened at Diagon Alley if they hadn't been there. Suddenly images of the dead strewn about the ground, and buildings of the various stores smashed came into focus in Harry's mind, and he added another reason to kill Voldemort to his already long list.

The next morning the Wizarding world was in shock from the attack upon St. Mungo's. Not only was the rush on to rebuild what the building stood for, but also the need for a central location of health care was of the essence in a time of war. Neville had been pulled aside as soon as they returned from St. Mungo's and told of his parents' disappearance. He took the news remarkably well although even he admitted that Voldemort couldn't truly hurt them anymore.

As Harry and Hermione took their rounds for the week neither could truly shake what they had seen a scant few hours earlier at St. Mungo's. It was as though they were both too numb to adequately put into words just how awful they felt. They knew that people would most likely die in the war, but such unbridled evil and savagery was completely unexpected. The attack on St. Mungo's had been done for no other reason than to send a message to the Order of the Phoenix.

When they had finished their rounds on the third floor Harry pulled Hermione into a small alcove and asked, "Hermione, can you feel

anything right now, or are you like me, and you feel so numb after seeing everything earlier that it scares you?"

Hermione wrapped her arms around Harry and buried her head into his shoulder and simply began to weep in response. Her sobs began to recede and she almost desperately asked, "How can anyone do something so horrible?"

Harry sighed as his eyes were also wet with unshed tears. He finally managed to say, "I don't really have an answer for you Hermione. I can tell you one thing though. This is the reason we fight this war. The prophecy really means nothing in the face of evil like this."

Hermione pulled away and looked into his eyes with red rimmed puffy eyes of her own. She finally sniffed and said, "I love you Harry."

Harry smiled and bent down to kiss Hermione on the forehead before he simply replied, "You know that I love you too."

For the moment no more words were needed and they both knew that soon enough words would lose all meaning when confronted with pure evil. The time for words was coming to an end and the time for action was coming to a head.

A/N: Yes I know, Amos Diggory as minister? Well just watch and see how he does before you criticize. I mean who has more to fight for than the man who was the father of the first casualty of the war? Without getting into too much detail Dumbledore felt the same sentiment as Harry and he did his own fair share of politicking to get Amos into office. Thanks to everyone who has reviewed the last few chapters, and keep up the good work on that.

Next chapter will be out in a few days. It will be the time leading up to the OWL's and including some OWL's. Keep reading and Please Review.

Chapter 44

The days following the attack on St. Mungo's affected the students of the school in various different ways. Harry found that the attack merely strengthened his resolve to end Voldemort's threat when he was able to. Meanwhile, Hermione blocked the entire event from her consciousness, and dragged Harry to the library to study for OWL reviews every second they were outside of class and awake.

Initially, Harry found Hermione's actions to be endearing as he found it to be exactly how Hermione had always dealt with the various problems they shared. However, as the days passed, Hermione was growing shorter and shorter with Harry and had even somehow managed to block their link in her growing temper.

Finally, on the first weekend of May, it boiled over when Harry finally figured out that Hermione was avoiding the images of the day by burying her emotions in her notes and books. Harry became aware of this when upon finishing their charms review for the day he asked, "Hermione, have you had any nightmares about that morning at St. Mungo's?"

Hermione looked at Harry with narrowing eyes and replied, "I really don't think this is the time for this."

Harry frowned and placed his hand on top of hers and replied, "We need to talk about it love, or it will only get worse for the both of us."

Apparently this had been the wrong thing to say as Hermione snapped in reply, "Why don't you just leave if all you are going to do is distract me from important things?"

Harry flinched away from her touch, removing his hand from hers, and with a pained expression said, "I'm sorry you feel that way. I'll leave you to your more important things then."

He quickly picked up his notes and books and without sparing another glance at Hermione he left the library with a wounded gait. Hermione watched him leave; finally becoming aware of just how short she had been with Harry recently. The overwhelming weight of

the guilt for her actions of the past few days with Harry crashed upon her all at once. She immediately took care of her notes and left the library in a near sprint; desperately trying to find Harry to apologize, and share the feelings she had long been repressing since the night following the attack.

After an hour of looking, Hermione began to feel even guiltier for dumping on Harry, and she was also growing worried that Harry may have done something rash as a result of her actions and words. With a flash of inspiration she obtained the marauder's map and after several minutes of scanning she found Harry in Myrtle's bathroom.

She pocketed the map and made haste to the bathroom, occasionally pulling the map out to ensure Harry hadn't left. As she finally approached the bathroom, she overheard the tale end of a conversation between Harry and Myrtle.

Harry's voice sounded strained, as he said, "I just don't get it Myrtle. I've tried to get her to open up to me the last few weeks so we could move past this together, but she's been burying the both of us in so much review that she merely dismisses me. Today she told me that her review was more important to her than me, or she insinuated it at least, and she didn't even apologize." After a short break his voice was so sad it brought tears to her eyes, "I just want to help and she won't let me."

Myrtle finally replied, "If you get tired of her, you could always join me in here Harry." Hermione could almost hear Harry's eyes roll in response.

Gathering up her Gryffindor courage she entered the bathroom and spotted Harry before she quietly said, "I'm sorry Harry. I-I've just tried to stop thinking about that day, because if I do all of the faces come rushing back and I just can't handle it."

Harry walked over to Hermione and wrapped her into a tight hug before he murmured into her ear, "It won't get any better if you bury it love. I've just begun to learn that from my time with the Dursleys. Remember we are in this together, two parts of the whole, right?" Hermione nodded into his shoulder and he continued, "I think we

should talk about this tonight, and then Saturday night we can sneak out and wander the forbidden forest like the marauder's of old."

Hermione pulled her head slightly off of Harry's shoulder before she said with a sad smile, "That sounds lovely Harry."

After several hours of talking in Myrtle's bathroom Harry and Hermione returned to Gryffindor tower after midnight, both content with the progress they had made in their talk and looking forward to transforming in a couple of nights.

Saturday evening Harry and Hermione took a walk they had shared several times before walking in silence aside from the occasional word around the lake. Upon spotting their chance they wandered out of sight and transformed into their forms before slowly making their way towards the forbidden forest for a night of fun.

As they reached the edge of the forest the various odors of many different creatures awakened their canine senses. They smelt many rotting acromantula corpses near by and a group of centaurs. How they knew what each creature smelt like apparently was a built in instinctually.

They slowly followed tracked their way to the centaurs careful to remain in the shadows as much as possible. They reached a small clearing to find a small camp that the centaurs had set up following their apparent battle with the acromantulas. It appeared that the Centaurs were engaged of some kind of celebration following their victory, so Harry and Hermione were careful to remain undetected.

Unfortunately, it was not meant to be as one of the guards for the camp spotted them and sounded the alarm quietly. Before Harry and Hermione knew what had hit them they were surrounded by Centaurs with far too many crossbows aimed at them to make an escape.

Harry recognized one of the centaurs not to aim a weapon as he stood next to a group of much older centaurs that appeared to be engrossed into a very deep conversation. When the conversation finally ended the younger centaur approached Harry and Hermione before he said, "Hello Harry Potter we meet again. Although this time

the circumstances are a little changed. Please grace us with both you and your mate's presence changelings."

Harry and Hermione both shifted back to their human forms and made no threatening gestures. Harry finally said, "Hello Ronan, how do the stars fare for thee." Harry was eternally grateful that he had read the book on sentient creatures for an essay in Care of Magical Creatures.

The red haired centaur grinned slightly as several interested murmurs ran through the group of centaurs. Ronan answered, "The stars have turned for the better as of late. However, we have other trying business we must attend to tonight. Our leader Magorian and the rest of the tribe elders have much to discuss with you and your mate."

Harry and Hermione smiled tentatively before Harry replied, "That sounds acceptable my friend. May I request my mate Hermione speak as an equal for the remainder of the night?" Ronan nodded respectfully and Harry was immensely happy that he didn't have to carry the conversation the entire night with a culture he had limited knowledge of.

They were escorted to a large table that had been erected since their arrival and were given the only two chairs at the table. The table soon filled with several older centaurs surrounding a reasonably regal looking centaur with jet-black hair much like Harry's. Ronan took residence near Harry and Hermione and appeared to be their liaison in the group.

Magorian finally spoke as he said, "Chosen One and his soul mate; you honor us with your presence this evening. Our tribe has enjoyed a great victory against a rogue band of Acromantulas that escaped the reach of their leader. We have much to discuss but first we must feast on the fruits of our labors." Several female centaurs flocked around the table bringing various fruits and meats to feast upon. Harry and Hermione enjoyed the fruit they recognized and ate in silence although they did hold hands as a show of solidarity and also to calm their nerves.

When the feast was finished and the large table cleared Magorian said, "We read in the stars that times of great joy and sadness are in

your future. Many a past night had always revealed the stars favoring your adversary. However, recently the stars have shifted and you have become the victor. Tonight we wish to discuss an alliance between you and your mate and the tribe. We wish no alliance with Dumbledore and his followers, but we will fight along your side. For too long our peoples have lurked in the shadows as our rights were stripped and we did not fight this because the stars did not favor doing so. Now the stars favor our fight and it is intimately twined with your success."

Harry and Hermione shared a look before Harry answered, "We humbly accept your offer of an alliance. For now, all we ask is that you keep your forest free of the evil presence of Voldemort and his followers. We will begin the process of returning your tribe to a position it so richly deserves."

Magorian and the elders seemed quite pleased with this before one of the elders spoke, "Young changeling, we have met your sire and his friends nearly twenty years past and the stars indicate that although he is dead, he has great pride for you in the beyond."

Harry's eyes filled with tears and Hermione answered for him, "Thank you kind elder. These words mean a great deal to us both. Although it comes at great sorrow we must haste our leave because we have important tasks that must be dealt with tomorrow."

The centaurs all slightly bower their heads in a respectful farewell as Harry and Hermione repeated the gesture back. After transforming back into their shapes they left the forest undetected and entered the castle using the same hidden entrance at the base of Gryffindor tower. The day had been quite long but ultimately very fulfilling as well. After they entered the common room unnoticed they shared a long and passionate snog in their favorite chair, content with the contact their lips and tongues made.

When they finally parted Hermione gave Harry a seductive smile and crooked her finger for Harry to come closer. When he got close enough to feel her warm breath on his face she whispered in his ear, "Tomorrow we need to do one last review for Arithmancy before we have our OWL on Monday. But, if you're good we can make a trip to

the room of requirement tomorrow afternoon; as a reward for both of us.”

Harry smiled and kissed her forehead before he yawned slightly and replied, “That sounds bloody brilliant love. Sweet dreams.” Harry turned and walked up the stairs to the fifth year boy’s dorms slowly chancing to glance back at Hermione once or twice before disappearing from view.

Hermione watched him the entire way up the stairs and once he disappeared she left out a soft sigh, and with a fond smile remembered the last time they shared the room of requirement. She happily walked up the stairs to her own bed and the restful night of sleep that accompanied it.

Little did she know Harry had reached his room and upon searching his trunk for his pajamas he happened upon the mirror that Sirius had given him on Hermione’s birthday. With a slightly sad smile he carefully wrapped the mirror in a shirt before he put on his pajamas and slipped into bed with his thoughts returning to the brown-eyed girl he loved so much.

After a long, but ultimately satisfying, day of study both mental and physical spent on Sunday Harry and Hermione prepared for the beginning of their OWL’s that incidentally coincided with the end of classes for the term.

Harry and Hermione were eating their customary early breakfast doing some last minute review for the Arithmancy final starting at nine. Only the Arithmancy final was that day so the vast majority of the fifth years were still enjoying the respite to sleep in for the morning.

After breakfast the rather nervous pair walked to the Arithmancy classroom and instead of meeting Professor Vector outside of the door like every other day, there was an elderly looking witch they both recognized Griselda Marchbanks from the election for minister a few weeks prior.

The elderly witch smiled when she spotted Harry and Hermione and she warmly said, “Ah Ms. Granger and Mr. Potter, I’ve heard we

should be expecting great things from you in my office on the next couple of months.”

Harry deferred to Hermione as they both blushed at the praise. Hermione finally replied, “We will certainly do our best Madam Marchbanks.” The elderly witch nodded and she ushered them into the classroom to join the other students in the class.

Harry and Hermione waved to Mathias who was already sitting in the table across from them and they shared a nervous smile before they were seated and given the exam in a magically sealed booklet.

Madam Marchbanks seated the last student before she walked to the front of the room and with a small smile spoke, “Welcome to the Ordinary Wizarding Levels examination for Arithmancy. If you pass the exam with an Exceeds Expectations or better you will be eligible to take the NEWT level examination for this class as well. You may open your booklets and begin your exam. You have three hours to complete it.”

Harry and Hermione opened their booklets and began to work feverishly on the exam. Harry had to hide a smile a few times as he felt the jubilation Hermione felt when she figured out a problem. Hermione finished her exam in an hour and a half and went over her answers twice by the time Harry had finished and rechecked his answers. They both raised their hands and Marchbanks collected their exams and escorted them out of the room.

Marchbanks closed the door to the exam room and Hermione jumped into Harry’s arms and gave him a tight hug along with a deep kiss as he felt the tension drain from her body. Finally, breaking the kiss she whispered in his ear, “Well love, that’s one down.”

Hermione unwrapped her legs from Harry’s waist as he let her down before he replied with a crooked smile, “Just remember to do that for the rest of the exams we have together and I think I’ll be just fine.” Hermione smiled prettily and hooked her arm with Harry’s to lead him down to the great hall for lunch.

Monday evening they held the final meeting of the DA as only a few members arrived to do some last minute review for their defense OWL on Wednesday.

Harry convened with only his inner circle in the DA in attendance with Luna there as moral support for Mathias. Harry smiled at the small assemblage before he said, "Well, due to the low turn out tonight we can work on any spells you might think will be necessary to have a mastery over for your practical on the OWL. We can start with anything so feel free to raise your hands."

Neville raised his hand and said, "I think we should practice our patronus even though it isn't exactly a required spell to learn for the OWL. I think we can probably get some extra credit on the practical if we show the proctor that we can cast one."

Hermione's face lit up as she pulled Harry into a hug and said, "Oh that's a wonderful idea Neville. Who here amongst us has their practical scheduled first?"

Mathias who already looked exhausted smiled slightly and said, "Mine is at 4:30 tomorrow."

Neville nodded and said, "Mine is at 4:50 tomorrow."

Susan replied, "Mine is at 2:00 tomorrow."

Harry said, "I have mine at 10:00 am tomorrow."

Hermione smiled and said, "That works nicely because I have mine at 11:30 tomorrow. Harry can explain how he taught the rest of us the charm and that we would be happy to show our patroni when we take our practical. That is ok, isn't it Harry?" She finished looking at Harry with big poppy dog eyes but a smile that indicated he would be rewarded for the deed.

Harry arched his eyebrow at her expression, before he smiled crookedly and replied, "Of course I will." The other couples snickered at the show Harry and Hermione were putting on before Harry stood and helped Hermione to her feet and with a soft pop the same chest

that had appeared numerous times in the room made one last appearance for the year.

After a few hours of practicing the various spells Hermione had suggested following their patroni practice Harry adjourned the final meeting of the DA for the year as he softly said, "Thank you for making this year in the DA a rewarding experience for me. I hope I was able to do the same for all of you here and those that didn't make it tonight." Mathias and Neville walked to Harry and chatted about doing the same thing next year with a larger group. The girls claimed Harry after he received his handshakes and back slaps from his mates.

Luna and Susan gave Harry hugs before Hermione wrapped him into a hug that she didn't relinquish as he talked with the girls about the same thing he had talked about with Neville and Mathias with. After they had extracted a promise from Harry to run the DA again next year Luna and Susan sought out their boyfriends and left the room to Harry and Hermione.

Hermione led Harry to the small couch the room had provided as she proceeded to show Harry just how much she appreciated his work with the DA for the year.

Tuesday morning Harry and Hermione were reading the prophet following their usual breakfast. As they held each other's hands Hermione squeezed Harry's hand tightly when she came upon an article of interest.

Break In at Ministry of Magic

By: Rita Skeeter

Monday evening alarms were sounded near the entrance of the Department of Mysteries. By the time the MLE could respond to the alarm the perpetrators had vanished.

There is no evidence that he-who-must-not-be-named or his forces were involved. However, there is little doubt that the break in somehow is involved with them.

While there is little to nothing known specifically about the Department of Mysteries, it has been long held that many powerful secrets of magic reside within the walls. This reporter can only hope that none of those secrets ever find their way into he-who-must-not-be-named's hands.

Harry took a deep breath upon finishing the article and after a moment of deep thought he frowned and said, "A dry run of his plan to get the prophecy no doubt." Hermione frowned at his deduction but could only nod in agreement.

Harry arrived in the defense classroom for his practical portion of the Defense against the Dark Arts practical portion for the OWL's. An older wizard spotted Harry at the entrance and motioned for him to enter the room. The older wizard with thinning gray hair introduced himself as he said, "Hello Mr. Potter. I am Malphesius Diggle your proctor for the practical today; I believe you may have met my younger brother Dedalus." Harry nodded and shook the man's hand before he flawlessly reproduced every spell he was asked to.

Diggle was clearly impressed before he asked, "Are there any other spells not from the curriculum, that you would be willing to share?"

Harry nodded and clearly said, "*Expecto Patronum*." Prongs bound from his wand and pranced for a moment before it stopped by Diggle and faded from existence."

Diggle was understandably in shock before he composed himself and said, "A very impressive showing Mr. Potter. But, I must ask as a matter of record what relevance does this have for the defense practical?"

Harry smiled and replied, "It's relevant because of the threat the dementors pose to the general public if they are allied with Voldemort. Professor Remus Lupin taught me this spell in my third year. Last year I taught the spell to Hermione Granger if you are interested to see her perform the spell also. She can also create a corporeal patronus. This year I taught the spell to four other students in a study group. They can all form corporeal patroni. Their names are Neville Longbottom, Susan Bones, Luna Lovegood a fourth year student,

and Mathias Stern. I imagine all of them would also be very happy to show their mastery of the spell at your request sir.”

Diggle smiled and nodded after he had copied down the other names and dismissed Harry with a friendly wave.

As Harry exited the room he spotted Ron nervously standing outside of the room preparing to take his turn next. Harry gave his friend a thumb up for good luck and watched in amusement as Ron nervously greeted Diggle before he entered the room trembling with nerves.

Harry happened upon Hermione in the library already preparing for the charms final on Thursday. Harry smiled when he found her with her nose buried in a book with her brow furrowed in thought. Harry tapped her shoulder and she pulled the book down to find Harry sitting across from her with a crooked smile.

She smiled and closed her book before she took his hand and gently asked, “How was the practical?”

Harry smiled and replied, “It was fair to any of the DA members. I did mention to the proctor that you would gladly show him your patronus. He seemed very interested in seeing all of the students who could produce a corporeal patronus.” Hermione gave him a peck on the lips before looking at her watch.

They sat in silence for a few minutes as Hermione drew her confidence and cool from Harry. She finally released his hand and said, “I think I need to go down to the defense room for my practical now. Wish me luck Harry.”

Hermione stood up and Harry gave her a tender kiss on the lips before he said, “That’s for luck. But, you won’t need it, my beautiful and brilliant love.” Hermione gave him a beaming smile before she left the library to take her practical.

Harry watched her leave and though picked up all of her remaining books and notes and returned to the Gryffindor common room to relax a little before dinner. As he relaxed with a book in his favorite chair he began to doze off.

When Harry awoke he felt a warm and comforting presence pressed against his chest. Slowly opening his eyes he found Hermione snuggled against his chest with a very content and beautiful smile adorning her face. Harry nuzzled her neck slowly rousing her to consciousness. Hermione let out a soft moan before she buried her face back into his chest. Harry eventually lulled her awake by caressing her cheek with his hand.

She slowly opened her eyes and said, "Afternoon love."

Harry smiled and gave her a peck on the lips before he answered, "Afternoon my beautiful witch. I see you decided to keep me some company after your practical."

Hermione smiled slightly and replied, "You looked so comfortable that I just had to join you. Once I got in your big warm arms I guess I fell asleep."

Harry smiled and softly said, "I wouldn't mind waking up like that for the rest of my life." Hermione blushed and he added almost absently, "How did the practical go?"

Hermione stretched slightly and replied, "It was easy like you said. Mr. Diggle found it interesting that our patroni were mates of each other. I didn't bother to explain it."

Harry nodded and then glanced at his watch to see that it was time for dinner. He sighed and said, "Not that I won't regret it as soon as we get up, but do you want to go down and grab some dinner. I guess we both sort of skipped lunch in pursuit of a nap." Hermione giggled and Harry helped her out of the chair before he followed and they walked down to the great hall.

Unfortunately, later that night Hermione began to withdraw from Harry again as the stress of the exams forced her into her familiar role of know-it-all bookworm, and that role didn't involve Harry as her boyfriend.

By Friday morning Harry had slowly begun to grow annoyed with Hermione's constant brow beating about studying and notes. They had been studying for their OWL's for nearly four months and

Hermione thought that since Harry didn't want to review the material for the tenth time he wasn't taking his studies seriously. She had become almost obsessed with studying and constantly ignored Harry when he talked to her. It seemed that the only time she felt like she needed Harry was for reassurance before an exam. However, by Friday Harry had grown tired of her actions and when she went to grab her hand he pulled away and softly said, "You really don't seem to need me anymore. I mean the only time you want me around is when you are nervous about an exam and need someone to console you. I love you but I can't do this for the next three weeks Hermione. Good luck with your exam."

Hermione's face immediately paled and she realized that she had been awful to Harry since Tuesday night. By the time she looked for Harry he had left the hall on his way to the charms classroom for the theory portion of the Charms OWL.

Harry took a seat next to Mathias who looked surprised at Harry's presence but didn't say anything to that effect. Hermione followed a moment later looking rather distraught and upon seeing Harry seated next to Mathias she fought back some tears and sat next to Neville who looked as surprised at her presence as Mathias had been with Harry's. She pushed her fear of Harry's potential break up to the back of her mind and concentrated solely on the exam. By the time she was finished she glanced to see if Harry had finished and was once again disappointed to find that Harry had already finished and left the room.

She ran out into the hallway hoping to find Harry waiting for her to accept her apology but he was once again absent and Hermione began to cry silently in an empty classroom. After several minutes she pulled herself together as well as she could and upon entering the hall she spotted Harry sitting on a bench looking at her with a combination of sympathy and sadness.

He walked over and pulled her into a hug before he said, "It breaks my heart to see you cry like this, but you have to understand why I said what I did."

Hermione nodded into his shoulder before she whispered, "I know I've been awful to you the past few days love. I also know you've given me several chances to stop doing what I was. It's just so hard to stop being something I've been my entire life. I've always been the know-it-all bookworm, it's what I do and it keeps me safe."

Harry sighed and said, "Remember Hermione, I grew up being called a freak and it never made me feel safe. I've come a long way in overcoming that label with your help. Now I need to do the same for you. Your intelligence makes you special, but it doesn't define who you are love. You are a warm, beautiful, funny, sensitive young woman that is the other half of my very being. You don't need to prove yourself to anyone else and I try to remind you that as often as you remind me that I am worthy of being loved. But, you have to share your feelings with me so that I can help you."

Hermione pulled away from Harry to look into his eyes to see the warmth and concern in them before she answered, "I'll try Harry, I promise. Why don't we go grab some lunch, and then we can take a walk by the lake to talk about this."

After a long talk about Hermione's long held fears of inadequacy that she covered with being a know-it-all they began to return to the castle when Harry dropped to a knee clutching at his head. After a moment where his face was contorted into a soul rending pain he relaxed as he realized Hermione's arms were wrapped around him.

He stood with Hermione's help as he felt rather light headed at what he had seen and felt. He finally said, "Seems like Tom was trying to send me a message. The only time I can feel his presence is when he has a murderous rage of some sort. Well I saw enough to know that Remus and Sirius are alive. But, they aren't in good shape. When he noticed I was there he simply said 'Potter you're next' and then I was pushed out."

He bit his lip much like Hermione did when in deep thought before he continued, "I guess it makes sense that if he can reach me when he is in a rage, then I can reach him when I am feeling particularly loved." He shook his head as though to rattle a stray thought loose before he continued, "Regardless of who opened the link he achieved

what he had sought to do. He reminded me that he is counting the days and I need to be prepared for that." Hermione nodded and kissed the tip of his nose before she tightened her grip on Harry both physically and emotionally for the days ahead.

A/N: I guess we saw this chapter a little of what makes Harry and Hermione tick. Of course stress can be the greatest crucible and pressure can turn coal into a diamond or some such nonsense. I hope you liked the chapter. **Please review and tell me what you thought of it.** Thanks to all of those who continue to review and keep reading.

Chapter 45

The second week of OWL's began inauspiciously with the Ancient Runes final although the main hurdle for early part of the week was the mandatory meeting with the heads of the houses for career counseling for the fifth years.

The morning of Harry and Hermione's meetings with McGonagall began normally enough as Harry met Hermione after his morning workout and they walked down to the great hall together. When they reached the hall however, things began to go wrong. Harry was immediately assaulted by a wave of giggling girls from each of the four houses as proclamations of love were handed out like candy on Halloween.

Harry and Hermione pushed their way through the crowd and after warnings and threats of punishment were issued by each of the heads of house. Harry immediately recognized something seriously bad had happened because normally the great hall was empty at this point in the morning.

Harry and Hermione took their seats and McGonagall handed them the copy of a special edition of the prophet from the previous night. They shared a weary glance at each other before encountering the article that had caused all of the trouble.

Boy-Who-Lived Confirmed as Heir of Gryffindor and Second Richest Wizard of Great Britain

By: Penelope Clearwater

An anonymous source recently divulged to this reporter that Harry Potter voted in the election for Minister of Magic and made a rightful claim as head of the house for both the Potter and Gryffindor families. A ministry genealogy expert confirmed Potter's claim when asked early this morning.

In addition to being the equivalent of royalty in the eyes of the wizarding world as a result of this news, it also means that Potter is definitely one of the richest wizards in the world. According to ministry

tax records, The Potter estate's value forwarded by Gringott's easily place Potter as the second richest wizard in all of Britannia behind Albus Dumbledore. Potter's liquid assets are valued at well over two hundred million galleons for the Potter estate alone. The exact value for the Gryffindor estate is highly speculated to be in excess of a billion galleons but due to the estate's place as one of the original customers of the bank no value is needed for ministry records.

With this news in addition to Potter's "other assets" it is no wonder that he is currently ranked as second most eligible bachelor under the age of 21 by Witch Weekly. Witches let the competition for Potter's heart begin.

Harry's eyebrow seemed to rise above his head as Hermione immediately started to send death glares at any brave hearted witches willing to incur her wrath by trying to steal her boyfriend. After a moment of thought Harry muttered, "Had to be Percy that git. He was the only non-voting individual in the court as the Ministry's official scribe. Merlin, this is going to make the rest of the year total misery trying to hide from them."

Hermione softened as she listened to Harry and she twined her fingers with his clearly showing off her promise ring to several nearby witches and said, "Harry, we can talk to the headmaster about forcing all of your suitors to stay away during the remainder of our OWL's. I have an alternate plan for Percy ok?"

Harry eyed Hermione warily as she looked dangerously throughout the hall, before she looked at Harry as protectively as she ever had before and said, "Trust me on this love you don't want to know. Although I imagine if Lily were here, she would approve." Harry's eyes misted slightly before he gave Hermione a marauder worthy grin and nodded his approval.

By the end of breakfast the staff had managed to instill enough fear in the various witches after Harry to allow him to exit the hall without being mauled.

Harry had his career counseling immediately following breakfast so he gave Hermione a sweet kiss on the lips before he made his way to McGonagall's office for the meeting.

After a soft knock on the door he was welcomed into Professor McGonagall's office with a smile and motion of her hand for Harry to sit in a seat.

McGonagall was looking at small pile of papers that Harry could see pertained to him alone and he couldn't help but feel very uncomfortable by all of the various marks visible on the pieces of parchment. Unable to remain silent any more he jokingly asked, "That bad Professor?"

McGonagall gave Harry a wry smile which Harry thought suited her much better than her typically stern expression. She replied, "Mr. Potter I assure you that there is nothing in your record that indicates anything other than the highest of praise. In fact, I have been looking at your notes intently the last few days; in an attempt to find some sign of a career that would be to your liking. However, with the news of yesterday evening's unfortunate article, I am almost convinced that you could find as much fulfillment managing your resources as working as an auror or other ministry employee."

Harry smiled and replied, "Yes I've come to the same conclusion." McGonagall appeared to deflate a little before he continued, "That's why I think a career in education is the direction I want to go in."

McGonagall gave Harry a beaming smile before she said, "I believe that would be an outstanding choice Mr. Potter. Your marks the past two years in addition to your services performed to the school would allow you your choice in any open professorial positions at any wizarding school in the world."

Harry nodded and replied, "I appreciate the praise professor, but Hogwarts is the only place I'd ever want to teach at." McGonagall gave Harry an appreciative nod before she filed the necessary paperwork.

Upon completing the paperwork she softened and gave Harry a sympathetic look before she said, "I will make sure the headmaster makes an announcement that should protect you and Ms. Granger from the overzealous advances of the less reputable witches of the school."

Harry smiled and replied, "Thank you Professor that means a lot to the both of us." McGonagall nodded and dismissed Harry with a wave and a soft smile reserved for only her favorite students.

Harry found Hermione in her favorite spot towards the back of the library. She smiled when she saw him and asked, "So, how did the meeting with Professor McGonagall go love?"

Harry shrugged and replied, "She was surprised that I wanted to be a teacher evidently. I guess the headmaster hasn't informed her of the DA or any of our conversations."

Hermione made a slight frown and replied, "Yes he tends to have a predisposition of determining what everyone needs to know doesn't he?" Harry only nodded in reply before he joined Hermione in her transfiguration review.

After their talk Hermione had almost underwent an overnight change in relation to her attitude concerning the OWL's. She still wanted to study for the exams but she also knew that she couldn't stop living in order to do her best on them. She found herself placing less importance on the end result of acing the exams and merely concentrated on preparing herself to her fullest potential. Her new plans involved spending as much time with Harry and her other friends away from the books as possible and she even joined in on a few pick up Quidditch matches after studying.

Harry found that with Hermione less stressed out about exams he had fallen in love with her again only in a new and different way. He realized this was who Hermione would have been if she had friends growing up and it injected a new enthusiasm for life into him that he had been missing since seeing the aftermath as St. Mungo's. He realized that despite his destiny he would live his life as a teenage bloke trying to love his girlfriend the best he could and never to forget the messages the war had already taught him.

As Harry was broken from his musings by a kiss on the lips from Hermione he grinned crookedly and asked, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Hermione giggled and replied, "I was asking you a question and you just zoned out on me love. I couldn't think of anything else as effective at getting your attention as a nice kiss."

Harry looked sheepishly down at the ground and replied, "I'm sorry I was just thinking about all of the lessons I've learned this year I guess." Hermione smiled gently and caressed his cheek as he continued, "We both have grown up so much this year, and yet, I realized I'm still a teenager so I don't have to have all of the answers; especially as long as I have you."

Hermione was so moved by Harry's words that a few tears escaped her eyes as Harry gently brushed them away she said, "That was an amazing thing to say Harry. When I look at you I don't need to look any further to know why I am fighting in this war. I'm fighting for our future together. For a future with many little Potters running around at our house at Hogsmeade; before we have to take the FLOO to the castle because we have classes to teach for the day. I want all of that Harry and I know when I look at you that I'll have it, and it will make me so happy when it happens."

Harry leaned over and kissed the tip of her nose before he said, "Just when I think I couldn't love you more you say something like that." A fond smile crossed his face that made Hermione warm all over before he glanced down at his watch and said, "I think you have a meeting to attend in about twenty minutes. I'll take care of our books and notes while you meet with Professor McGonagall and discuss your future plans for world domination." Hermione laughed which only broadened Harry's smile before she gave him a parting kiss on the lips and nearly skipped from the library to McGonagall's office.

Harry finished packing and returned to the common room to find it completely empty which was unusual for the middle of the day. Usually someone was studying or playing a game of chess between classes but not today for some reason, which had Harry rather concerned.

Harry took his usual seat and pulled out a book on advanced sword fighting techniques. Harry had been practicing his technique in the

room of requirement every morning and was quickly gaining confidence in his ability to wield the sword of his ancestor in battle.

As he read the book he felt a presence enter the room and lowered his book to find Romilda Vane one of the many witches within his own house that had been lavishing him with attention earlier in the day following the release of the article.

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose before he wearily asked, "What can I help you with Ms. Vane?"

Romilda flipped her long black hair over her shoulder, in a way that reminded him of Ginny far too much, before she coyly said, "Nothing Harry I just wanted to see if could use some company."

Before Harry had a chance to shake his head she leaned in and Harry smelled the familiar scent of parchment mixed with strawberries and cream. His eyes narrowed at Romilda who was looking quite smug before he said, "Ms. Vane if you insist on trying to illegally molest me through the use of a love potion in your perfume, I suggest you tell whoever made it for you that they made it incorrectly."

Romilda paled before she tried to stutter out an excuse, "Y-you must be mistaken Harry. I didn't use anything in my perfume."

Harry shook his head and said, "I'm going to make this easy for you Ms. Vane. I'll not report this if you send the word around the school that any future attempts of this nature will result in your punishment, as well as any other witches in competition for my affections. I will not tolerate this any more, so make it clear that I am, in essence, betrothed to Hermione and if anyone tries anything against either of us there won't be enough of them left for even magic to identify." Romilda let out an audible gulp as she could see the magic in Harry's eyes swim and clash violently with itself like a ship on stormy seas. The girl turned and made a hasty exit from the common room to relay the message before Harry could second-guess his punishment.

Meanwhile Hermione was in the middle of what would prove to be a very informative discussion with Professor McGonagall. McGonagall greeted Hermione at the door before she led her to a seat and took her place behind the desk.

McGonagall looked down at the young witch that reminded her so much of two others that had come through Hogwarts in her life; Lily Potter and herself. She smiled gently at Hermione before she said, "Ms. Granger I am curious as to know what your career wishes might be. I believe you would be an attractive candidate for employment in any quarter following your graduation. In fact, I believe it would be in your best interests to attend this Friday's meeting of Professor Slughorn's club. I wished to tell Mr. Potter this as well but I am afraid he sidetracked me with a bit of the patented Potter charm and I forgot to mention it."

Hermione smiled knowingly before she said, "I am well aware of what those green eyes can do to even the most controlled individual Professor." McGonagall nodded her understanding before she smiled and appeared in deep thought for a moment.

She finally broke from her thoughts and said, "Once again I am getting sidetracked, which is a habit I only tend to fall into when speaking to my favorite students." Hermione blushed at the praise before McGonagall asked, "What career interests you the most Ms. Granger?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "I believe a career in education here at Hogwarts is what I want Professor."

Professor McGonagall suppressed her grin with the ease of someone who had many years of practice at it before she replied, "An outstanding choice Ms. Granger. Do you have the time for a little reminiscing from an old lady Ms. Ganger?" Hermione nodded before McGonagall entered into her memories of the past.

She finally said, "I had a very similar discussion like the one we just shared, with Lily Evans around twenty years ago. She also wished to go into education and in fact had a student teaching position already set up with Filius to replace him. However, as fate would have it she became involved with James Potter and finally decided to enter the auror academy with him. Filius was disappointed but he understood that in a time of war it was where she was best suited. He has remained as a professor here until he can find a suitable replacement himself. He has indicated such an interest in you as his replacement.

However, you may find in Horace's meeting Friday that you need not limit yourself needlessly to one career. With your and Mr. Potter's unique abilities I believe such an arrangement is already in the workings."

Hermione furrowed her brow before she asked, "Can you tell me anymore about Friday's meeting Professor?"

McGonagall smiled mischievously and replied, "It would be a pity to ruin the surprise. I have already volunteered to take your patrol for the evening so you needn't worry about that. I believe that I have another meeting in a few moments so I must cut this short regrettably. Good luck with the remainder of your OWL's and feel free to share the information I told you with Mr. Potter." Hermione smiled and waved to Professor McGonagall before she exited the room and McGonagall smiled wanly at the closing door before she prepared for her next counseling session.

Hermione entered the common room to find it completely empty aside from the comforting presence of Harry in their favorite chair. Hermione grabbed his book from his hands and sat in his lap before giving him his book back. Harry smiled and asked, "How did the meeting go love?"

Hermione shrugged and replied, "It went well Harry. McGonagall also informed me that we have our duties excused on Friday to meet a special guest at Slughorn's meeting. She insinuated that it would be in both of our best interests to attend. She mentioned something about a part-time job after we get out of school." Harry nodded and then pulled her tighter content to just feel her warm body against his.

After a few minutes of holding each other he finally said, "So, Romilda Vane tried to use a love potion on me. But since there was no item as a focus it only reminded me of you. Not that it would have worked anyways, but I sent word with young Ms. Vane that should help get some of the more zealous of the gold diggers in the school of our backs."

Hermione smirked and said, "Stupid little bint anyways. It's not like it wouldn't be suspicious to me that you suddenly took an interest in a third year you hardly know. All it takes is a little wine and the effects

of the love potion would be nullified for long enough to make the counter potion to Amortentia.” Harry’s arms slid down to her waist and she also said, “Professor McGonagall shared a little story about your mum if you are interested in hearing it.” Harry nodded into her shoulder and she proceeded to tell Harry what McGonagall had told her not an hour earlier.

When they reached the great hall, there were still a few stragglers from the morning fighting to get a spot close to Harry at the Gryffindor table. Dumbledore watched with a slightly amused expression on his face before he stood and addressed the school.

Dumbledore said, “I wish to comment on certain students’ behavior since the arrival of the article addressing one of our own last night. Mr. Potter will not be harassed and any actions that he deems as harassment will be dealt with in a swift and just manner. I feel confident that this will be the last I hear on the matter.”

Harry and Hermione shared satisfied smiles before they began to eat as the stragglers shifted away from the couple in an attempt to stay out of trouble. Neville watched the girls move with a bemused expression and took his seat across from the couple and was soon joined by Susan who smiled and said, “So Harry, how did it feel being stalked by dozens of desperate witches?”

Harry chuckled and replied, “Not as fun as most guys would make you believe.” Hermione smugly took Harry’s hand and kissed it before she sat it back down and continued to eat her mincemeat pie.

Neville nodded and said, “I think I can understand that mate. Of course, if you were single it might have been a different song you’d be singing now.”

Harry arched his eyebrow and replied, “Nah, I doubt it mate. Trust me, girls who want you for your fame or money aren’t girls you want anything to do with. I’ve been lucky enough to find one of those special girls that looks beyond all of the peripheral stuff to see me and still love me.”

Hermione whispered into his ear, “I like to think we both have gotten quite lucky Harry.” She pulled away slightly, her love for Harry clearly

in her eyes.. She eventually added loud enough for everyone to hear, "You saved me from a life where the only friends I would have had were books, and I'm sure Malfoy and his crew would have either killed me or maimed me by this point without you around in my life."

Harry didn't reply other than give her a kiss on the lips before he touched his forehead with hers just savoring the feel of being close to her. When someone cleared their throat they slowly pulled apart to find a very amused looking Dumbledore standing behind them. Hermione blushed and stammered trying to find an excuse as to why they were in their earlier position while Harry merely shared Dumbledore's amused look.

The headmaster finally said, "I hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me for failing to mention your heritage earlier but I believed then and still do now that it wouldn't have simplified anything by knowing it. If you wish I can help you explore your assets with the house of Gryffindor this summer. As the headmaster of the school I have access to the records and can execute any necessary paperwork to transfer everything to one account."

Harry smiled slightly as Neville and Susan watched in interest before he said, "I think I'd like to keep the accounts separate, but I would like to have some idea of the various properties and objects that are in the vault." Dumbledore nodded and walked back to the staff table as many in the hall watched the exchange with interest trying to decipher the body language of the pair to ascertain the nature of the conversation.

Harry glanced over at the Ravenclaw table and spotted Mathias and Luna and he sent a mental message to Mathias indicating they would talk about it later. Mathias nodded and relayed the message to Luna who didn't appear particularly affected by the news other than to take another sip of her juice.

By Friday things were back to normal for Harry and his friends despite the public revelation that Harry was the only heir of Godric Gryffindor. Hermione had spent several hours working on her payback to Percy and his girlfriend and she refused Harry's please for some clue as to what she was doing. She replied the same way every

time, by giving Harry a kiss on the lips and a mischievous wink that drove him crazy in more ways than one.

After a day spent reviewing for the OWL's they had the next week Harry and Hermione went to their dorms to dress for the final Slug Club meeting of the year.

Harry dressed in a set of plain black dress robes with the Potter family coat of arms on the breast with a plain white button up undershirt covering his dragonhide vest.

Hermione walked down the stairs to find Harry standing in the corner looking out the window watching the sun set. Hermione had dressed in an elegant black dress that was form fitting but not overly tight. Harry turned at the sound of her walking down the steps and gave her a wide smile in appreciation of her efforts. He walked over to the base of the stairs and took her hand before he said, "Well my dear, are you ready for our last excuse to dress up for the year?"

Hermione giggled and nodded before she took Harry's offered hand and they began their journey to the dungeons and Slughorn's quarters.

As they reached the door an older man opened it and greeted them with an odd gleam in his eye before he said, "Ah just the pair I've been waiting for. Professor Slughorn is inside entertaining his guests. I was wondering if I might have a few moments of your time before you enter the party tonight?"

Harry and Hermione both nodded and he led them to an empty classroom just down the hall neither had ever noticed before. He stood as Harry and Hermione took a pair of seats at the front of the classroom where they usually sat together. The man finally addressed them after a moment of looking at them in such a way that they felt their very souls being measured for some reason. He finally nodded as though confirming a suspicion to himself before he said, "My name is Jameson. I work for the unspeakable branch at the department of mysteries. I am here today to offer the both of you full access to our department in exchange for a promise to help us in the future as part time agents. Feel free to ask any questions and if you decide not to

join us than we will *obliviate* your memory of the meeting with your permission.”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and shrugged before Harry said, “I think that will be acceptable Mr. Jameson.”

Jameson smiled and replied, “Very well, feel free to ask any questions and I will answer them to the best of my abilities.”

Hermione’s face lit up and she asked, “Where in the ministry building is the department of mysteries located?”

Jameson smiled and replied, “Opposite the lift doors on level nine is a single door that allows access to the department of mysteries. There are several checkpoints near the entrance and you will be given full access if you accept the position as junior agents. The department isn’t impenetrable so if for instance Voldemort attempted to attack the ministry he could easily find another way into the ministry.”

Harry spoke next, “If I have a prophecy made about me how could I access it?”

Jameson made a knowing smile and replied, “I believe your prophecy is on row 97 of the hall of prophecies Mr. Potter.” Harry arched his eyebrow but then motioned for him to continue, “Only you can access the prophecy and simply taking it off the shelf does it. Your hands must open it and no one else’s or it will break and its contents will be lost to eternity.”

Harry nodded grimly before Hermione asked, “What training do we need to undertake in order to be given the positions?”

Jameson smiled slightly and replied, “I am well aware of your abilities and can say you would need only the simplest of training for our secrecy acts in the department. I am aware you are both animagi and have mastered magic well beyond what is taught at the school. You will have full access to any and all of our materials including our library, which is better than Hogwarts in many ways.” Hermione visibly brightened at this and Harry covertly stifled a laugh at her reaction with a well-timed fake cough. Although based upon the look on Hermione’s face he didn’t conceal it as well as he thought he had.

Harry thought he had better say something to get out of the hole he had placed himself in so he said, "I believe Hermione would like that very much." He chanced a quick glance at Hermione to find the anger had drained from her face before he continued, "I believe that we accept your offer." Hermione nodded and grasped Harry's hand tightly indicating he wasn't completely off the hook, but that the way he needed to make it up would be mutually enjoyable.

Jameson looked genuinely pleased and manufactured a pair of security clearance cards before he handed them to the couple. He favored them with slight smile before he said, "When you feel like visiting the department just show those to the first security checkpoint and you will have full access to the remainder of the time you are there."

Harry's face suddenly lit up and he asked, "Would it be possible to bring guests if the secrets revealed are placed under a *fidelus* charm?"

Jameson looked thoughtful for a moment before he nodded and said, "What an intriguing use of the *fidelus* charm. Yes that would be acceptable Mr. Potter." He nodded and left the classroom heading away from Slughorn's room as Harry and Hermione entered the room to find the party in full bloom with the butterbeer of typical meetings replaced by firewhiskey and spiked pumpkin juice.

Harry and Hermione spotted Mathias and Luna and were motioned over by their Ravenclaw friends. Harry conjured a couple of glasses of un-spiked pumpkin juice and handed Hermione her glass before taking a sip from his own.

Mathias smiled at the pair and asked, "What took you two so long?" He arched his eyebrow in question as Luna fought to keep from giggling at catching their two friends off guard for once.

Hermione blushed but replied, "Harry and I unlike some people we know can control ourselves when we choose to."

Harry puffed out his chest an exaggerated amount and added, "Yeah like she says." Of course he barely got it out before the four broke off into some uncontrolled laughter. When the laughter finally subsided

to a mild chuckle Harry asked with a slight grin, "So how does an unscheduled trip to the department of mysteries sound sometime soon?"

A/N: Another chapter down in my little corner of the Potterverse. I hope you enjoyed the fluff this chapter because next chapter will be low in the fluff department. Please review and tell me what you thought of the chapter and how I am bringing Harry and Hermione along. **Keep up the great reviews and keep reading.**

Chapter 46

Due to a scheduling quirk in the test taking process for fifth year students that left a two-week gap in the middle of their OWL's coinciding with the beginning of the NEWT's for seventh years. The fact that the office for the wizard examinations authority was severely understaffed due to the increase in auror forces was not lost on anyone and most fifth years, Harry and Hermione included, welcomed the break to relax and prepare for the other half of their tests.

Monday of their first week of break Harry and Hermione were found in the common room quizzing each other on their potions notes and rewarding every correct answer with a quick kiss on the lips. Of course all of the males in the room quickly left the room leaving all of the single females watching the couple wistfully.

Harry chuckled after giving Hermione yet another kiss for getting a correct answer and whispered into her ear, "You do realize that they are quite pathetic, don't you?"

Hermione giggled and she ran her hands through Harry's hair and replied, "As much as I want to agree with you love, I can understand how they feel. I was feeling the same way last year whenever you talked about Cho, I just hid it better."

Harry pulled back to look Hermione in the eyes incredulously and asked, "You're not kidding are you?" Hermione shook her head and Harry pulled her into a hug before he murmured into her hair, "I'm sorry that I kept you waiting as long as I did." Hermione merely shook her head, tickling his nose with her hair in the process, which caused him to chuckle.

However as the day progressed Harry began getting a headache that had him concerned for obvious reasons. Finally, as they went down stairs for dinner did the headache begin to subside. Just as Harry was about to give a relieved smile, a raven flew into the great hall, stunning most present into silence. The raven was typically a harbinger of bad news and Harry immediately knew that its message was meant for him.

Hermione watched Harry smile and then tense before she also noticed the raven's presence and reached over to grab Harry's left hand and give it a squeeze for reassurance. The raven swooped down and dropped a piece of parchment that simply reeked of evil and it even had a few dried bloodstains for good measure.

Harry gulped nervously as the entire hall watched with baited breath for Harry to read the letter. Mustering up his courage he opened up the letter and it read:

Potter,

The time draws near for our trade to be made. In one weeks time at 1 pm this parchment will serve as a one way portkey to the entrance of the ministry of magic. If Dumbledore attempts to use this with you it will not work and your precious mutts will die. Feel free to bring your classmates and your favorite mudblood so I can give them a proper greeting.

Your Friend,

Lord Voldemort

Hermione read the parchment with Harry and they shared an anxious look before they were broke from their musings by the headmaster. Dumbledore smiled warmly and asked, "Harry my boy, am I to guess that letter you received indicates the current condition of our two missing agents of the order?"

Harry felt irrationally angry as Dumbledore referred to the two men closest he would ever have to fathers as mere agents, and he snapped in reply, "Why would you care all of the sudden? You spoke of rescue attempts that wouldn't include Hermione and I, and yet you haven't done anything yet to rescue them. Why is that?"

Dumbledore winced at Harry's tone but did not refute his claims and merely said, "Have faith Harry. We will get them back."

Harry shook his head and in a more respectful tone quietly replied, "When sir? Will it be after they've been tortured beyond the point of

insanity? I'm afraid I can't accept that answer anymore sir. If you don't rescue them soon, then I will, your orders be damned."

Dumbledore could see the anguish in Harry's eyes and suddenly realized that this was something Harry had been silently carrying on his own over the past few weeks. Hermione even looked surprised at Harry's words so that clearly meant he had been more than concerned about his two surrogate uncles then he had let on.

Harry took one last drink of his pumpkin juice before he stood and quietly left the hall parchment in hand and a determined glint in his eye. Hermione knew exactly where he was heading so she let him go alone to cool down so that by the time she arrived they could make a plan about how they would use the letter to their advantage.

Harry arrived in the room of requirement and the room appeared like one giant China cabinet. A cricket bat appeared in his right hand and he immediately let loose all of the frustration he had been feeling for the last few weeks. The image of Voldemort's head flashed in front of Harry's eyes as he destroyed all the room had created, and still needed to feed the beast of unrequited vengeance that had swelled within him.

Hermione finally arrived and gasped when she walked into the room filled with broken China and Harry was sobbing freely as he wielded a cricket bat and smashed the dishes in the far corner of the room. Hermione slowly approached him and said, "Harry why didn't you tell me how you felt about Remus and Sirius' capture instead of holding it all inside?"

Harry's hand limply dropped the cricket bat and his shoulders began to hitch uncontrollably before he spoke brokenly, "I wanted to Hermione, I really did. But, I didn't want you to see me like this. I hate it when the anger gets the best of me and I have to take it out on something."

Hermione gently grasped Harry's shoulder and turned him towards her. His face was tear stained and the look in his eyes made her heart break. Realizing that little could be said that would actually improve the situation she merely said, "I'm here for you Harry. I always will be. For now that's all I can tell you that wouldn't be a lie or

an exaggeration.” Harry nodded as Hermione led him to a couch that appeared after a moments thought by Hermione.

After a few minutes of Hermione holding Harry she finally said, “We need to make a plan based on the letter Harry. We already know who is going with us, so now we have to figure out a way to plan ahead to give us the best chance of saving Remus and Sirius, and not getting any of us killed in the process.”

After a few more minutes of silence Harry had composed himself enough to say, “Ok Hermione, I think it’s time that we try to turn the tables on Voldemort and use fear as a tool. The question is, what do death eaters fear aside from Voldemort?”

Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment before she answered, “Why don’t we try to charm some boggarts so that they are attracted to the dark mark like the dementors are. We just need to find a few boggarts we can put in some trunks and shrink them until we get to the department of mysteries.” Harry nodded and she continued, “With all of the research we’ve done to key wards to the dark mark it should be quite simple to adapt that to the boggarts.”

Harry sighed and nodded his agreement as the wheels in his head turned before he grinned and said, “Dobby I need your help please.”

Dobby arrived in the room looking rather happy to see Harry and Hermione and grabbed both of their legs in a hug before he pulled away sheepishly and asked, “What can Dobby be doing for Master Harry Potter sir?”

Harry smiled and asked, “Dobby do you know of any of my properties that might have some boggarts you can find, trap, and bring back to me?”

Dobby nodded and replied, “Yes Master Harry. Dobby knows of such a place.” Dobby turned towards Hermione and said, “Miss Grangey, your parents is awful worried about you young miss. Ms. Emmy also wants to hear from the both of you too.”

Hermione nodded before she asked, “Dobby, how is Winky doing?”

Dobby fidgeted with his hands for a moment before he replied, "Winky is doing real bad Miss Grangey. Her Master Sirius is being hurt real bad and she is slowly dying without Master around."

Hermione gasped and asked, "Is there anything we can do to help her?"

Dobby smiled widely and replied, "Yes Miss Grangey, Dobby knows that you are Master Harry's mate and if you enter into a bonding contract with Winky it will overrule Master Sirius'."

Hermione nodded and Dobby vanished with a soft pop before he returned with Winky who by all rights did look as awful as Dobby had described. The little elf did brighten as she saw Harry and Hermione and squeaked as she hugged their legs before she said, "Oh young master and his missus Winky is so happy to be seeing you again."

Hermione smiled softly and asked, "Winky, would you like to be bonded to me as Harry's mate?"

Winky smiled and said, "Winky would like that very much, but Winky does not want to be forgetting Master Sirius while he is hurting."

Hermione nodded and replied, "I understand that Winky, so that's why my first request will be that you serve Sirius until he is healthy again ok?" Winky nodded and grasped Hermione's hand and after a soft glow emanated from their hands Winky appeared to be infused with energy.

Hermione eyed the little elf and said, "This is the same contract as you had before with Sirius, but I ask that you call me Mistress Hermione ok?" Winky nodded and wrapped Dobby into a hug causing him to blush madly.

Harry chuckled at his small friend's discomfort and asked, "Dobby, can you have what I asked for by Thursday?" Dobby nodded and grabbed Winky's hand and they vanished with a pair of soft pops.

Harry looked at Hermione with a small grin and asked, "Are you really ok about having Winky bonded with you?"

Hermione smiled slightly and nodded before she replied, "I am Harry. If you had asked me that question last year I would have given you a completely different answer, but after spending a month getting to know Winky I understand how house elves think and in time we can get them to believe in themselves to regain their rightful place."

Harry nodded his approval, and the wreckage of his anger binge was wiped from existence only to be replaced by the typical arrangement of a small room with a fire and couch. As they sat in the comfort of the room Harry played with Hermione's hair and tried to take advantage of her comfortable position to get some information on her plan to get Percy for his ineptitude.

He smiled and asked, "So love, are you ever going to tell me what you are planning to do with Percy?"

Hermione stretched up to give Harry a soft kiss before she said, "You'll know soon enough Harry. In fact, I imagine you'll be hearing about it next week some time if everything goes well next Monday." Harry nodded in mock exasperation, which caused Hermione to giggle and snuggle into Harry's chest a little bit deeper.

Tuesday evening after another full day spent studying for the remaining OWL's, Harry gathered his closest friends and prepared them for the week ahead on the front lines of the war against Voldemort.

Mathias, Luna, Susan, Neville, and Hermione all were seated in the room of requirement and only Hermione knew exactly what Harry wanted to talk about.

Harry walked into the room with a small smile and waved to his friends before he sat down next to Hermione on the couch. He let out a small sigh before he said, "What I am here to tell you tonight may be a shock to some of you and while I may ask for your help with this, by no way is it required that you follow me."

Everyone looked a little apprehensive at the statement but no one spoke as he continued, "As all of you are aware, Sirius Black and Remus Lupin operating as agents for the order of the phoenix were captured by Voldemort and his forces. Riddle has sent me a few

messages indicating that I need to retrieve a prophecy from the department of mysteries in exchange for the men I consider my uncles.”

Harry looked around the room and couldn't find the rampant fear and apprehension he had expected so he gave a look of gratitude to his friends. Finally, after a few moments he continued, “I received a portkey from that Raven that I am to take along with any of my friends to the entrance of the ministry to make the exchange after we retrieve the prophecy. Riddle is arrogant enough to bring Remus and Sirius only to kill them after I hand over the prophecy and I expect his best deatheaters there with him trying to kill us.”

Another scan of the room revealed that all of his friends had determined and combative looks on their faces. Harry smiled slightly and continued, “Hermione and I have come up with a plan to deal with most of the deatheaters by bringing some boggarts attracted to the dark mark. We've figured out the spell work and we have the boggarts properly charmed and placed in trunks.” He ran his hands through his hair and asked, “I guess what I really need to ask now is who all is with Hermione and me?”

They all nodded their readiness to join Harry and Hermione causing a look of relief to cover Harry's face. He finally said, “I hope you all know that I would willingly do the same for you if something similar ever happened.”

They all nodded and he added, “This weekend we will be training in the room of requirement under full battle simulations given twenty deatheaters and Voldemort in specs we have gotten for the department of mysteries. This is going to be done as clinically as possible so that we can reduce the risk for us. Does anyone have any questions?”

Neville asked, “Why don't you ask Dumbledore to come with you?”

Harry sighed and said, “Voldemort said the portkey he gave me wouldn't work if Dumbledore tried to use it and that he would kill Remus and Sirius.” Neville winced but nodded feeling about as comfortable with the prospect of a battle against Voldemort and his most faithful as Harry was.

Mathias asked, "Why don't you just tell Dumbledore to be at the ministry at that time so he can help if he is needed?"

Harry thought for a moment and replied, "I think I can manage that by having him receive the message by word of mouth from another order member. Thanks for the suggestion Mathias; every little bit helps with this." Mathias smiled and waved as to indicate that Harry would do the same for him, and it was true so it was left at that.

Everyone spent the next few minutes in silence letting the magnitude of their decisions weigh upon them before Luna broke the quiet and said, "I believe if we spend too much time being serious than we will be open to the Long horned flossnesters, and no one wants that."

Mathias wrapped his arms around Luna and despite the fact that no one could manage a laugh with their thoughts weighed down as they were, they all managed to smile wryly at the fact that Luna could still be herself even in a moment like this.

Saturday morning Harry awoke with a start eager to begin his day so that by Monday they could rescue Remus and Sirius. Harry reached the room of requirement and immediately found himself dueling with a mixture of swords and wands against an opponent the room had created. Harry switched from using his wand in his left hand to parry any attacks with his right hand firmly on the sword of his ancestor. After several minutes of a satisfying duel Harry cast a freezing charm on the body of his opponent and quietly dispatched of his enemy with a quick strike from his sword. After he returned his sword to its holster he went for a five-kilometer run before went to the prefect's bathroom to prepare for the day ahead.

By the time he had reached the common room Hermione was waiting for him with a small smile and passionate embrace that had Harry thanking whichever deity had brought Hermione into his life. After they broke apart Harry gave Hermione a smile that made her knees weak before he took her hand and led her towards the great hall.

As they sat and ate breakfast the other members of the Harry's inner circle joined them. Ron and Lavender watched this speculatively with Parvati and Seamus but knew that if it was something they needed to know Harry would tell them. In a way Harry shared a relationship with

most of the DA like Dumbledore had with Harry. The only difference was Harry made sure that they knew their input was welcome even if it wasn't accepted. It was simply a difference as small as forcing someone into dependency and allowing someone to make that distinction on their own. Harry had earned their respect and thusly earned his privacy if he desired it.

Harry welcomed his friends warmly and asked, "Is everyone ready to practice the beginning of the war?"

Neville and Mathias nodded grimly, while Susan and Luna just gave Harry tentative smiles that relayed their readiness. Harry nodded approvingly before they ate breakfast in a quiet intensity they had rarely been felt in the great hall before.

They reached the room of requirement and entered to find something akin to a war zone awaiting their arrival. Hermione shared a bemused look with Harry who only smiled at the work of his imagination. Mathias asked cheekily, "Um Harry, please don't tell me this is your idea of a warm up."

If Ron had said the same thing Harry would have snapped at him, because Ron couldn't concentrate when he needed to and joked far too much. However, Harry had no such qualms with Mathias and the joke did relieve some of the tension of the morning that had carried over from breakfast.

Harry gave the group a look over and said, "We are going to start with some generalized attack strategy. I want to see how well we work together in a variety of situations and then we'll work our way up to an actual trial run at the department of mysteries."

Susan looked a little uncertain before she asked, "Um guys, how do you know about the department of mysteries?" Neville suddenly looked very sheepishly down at his feet while Harry and Mathias fought hard not to laugh.

Seeing Harry's predicament Hermione helped him out and answered, "We told Neville to tell you but in all of the craziness of the week he must have forgotten." Neville gave Hermione a covert grin while Susan seemed mollified by the answer.

Harry filled in the blanks for Susan, "We were recruited to work as unspeakables in our spare time. So, we have access to all of the material that the department of mysteries has to offer including a layout of the department and its location."

Susan looked a little in awe but nodded her understanding, despite the fact that it was unheard of for an unspeakable to be named before many years of distinguished service with the auror branch of the MLE.

Harry took a deep breath before he said, "This is going to be random in relation to the opponents and their relative skill levels. So don't take anything for granted. They will be throwing unforgivables at you so be prepared to take cover and intercept the curses. If you are hit by a killing curse you are out for the remainder of the exercise. Anything else will diminish you as much as it would in real life. Hit with a *reducto* on your arm, you lose use of that arm the remainder of the exercise. Does everyone understand?"

Receiving no negative response, Harry closed his eyes and the room suddenly became even more expanse with the threat of deatheaters spread through it. After several minutes of intense warfare with the pseudo-deatheaters Harry was happy to see that no one had been seriously injured and only Susan had been hit by a bludgeoning hex with a glancing blow on her left shoulder.

The final deatheaters were dispatched and Harry seemed genuinely pleased with everyone's efforts including his own. The room provided some iced pumpkin juice that everyone immediately gulped down greedily.

After a few minutes of just catching their breath and relaxing Harry spoke, "That was quite good everyone. This time we are going to try the same sort of exercise on a higher difficulty and in a more constraining environment. If we do as well this time we are going to take a nice long lunch break before we tackle the ministry simulation. By the way, yes Voldemort will be in the simulation from my memory of the night of the third task. This way you are all forewarned, because seeing him is much different than hearing about him." Harry didn't miss the shudders everyone in the group aside from Hermione

shared at the proclamation and honestly he couldn't blame them as he still had nightmares of those red eyes from the night a year ago.

After their break the room reorganized itself into a building roughly the size of the department of mysteries with several smaller rooms. The simulation began as the group slowly formed a circle and rotated as they moved from room to room. With surgeon like precision they moved through each room in the simulation dispatching of every deatheater in ease and having no trouble either dodging or blocking the spells hurled at them.

As they cleared out the last room Harry let out a deep breath he had been holding and the room reverted to one of a smaller version of the Gryffindor common room. There was a table with food covering it and Harry led his friends to the food before letting them serve themselves first. After they had grabbed some food Harry served himself and took his seat next to Hermione who was eating her fish and chips with vigor he had never seen from her before. He leaned over and kissed her on the temple before he dug into his food as well.

After everyone had their fill of food they all sat in satiated quiet slowly let their food be digested as they held their partners and snuggled. Before they could drift off Harry said, "Now that we have rested and had a nice lunch we are going to go over what we need to do in the department of mysteries specifically."

Harry stood up and helped Hermione to her feet and began to slowly stretch out preparing for their first trial run at a place they would probably have nightmares of the rest of their lives following Monday.

The room shifted into the ninth level at the ministry as Harry could see the doors to the life and then opposite in the room the small door they had been informed led to the department of mysteries.

After they entered the department of mysteries Harry turned towards his friends and said, "This is going to be considerably different from our previous exercises. Expect mostly unforgivables and no real openings in your duels. If you haven't heard of the spell, don't get hit by it. This is the closest we are going to get to the real deal here guys so be prepared for life and death for the next hour or so."

Harry looked at Hermione and whispered in her ear, "You watch my back I'll watch yours. You can already suspect that by the end you'll be dealing with Bellatrix while I deal with Tom." Hermione nodded grimly and tightened her grip on her wand.

As they entered the checkpoint the simulation kicked into gear as a small group of deatheaters attempted to ambush them. They were sent retreating deeper into the department of mysteries and entered a room that Harry immediately recognized as he said, "This is the time room. This is where they do research on things like time turners and time travel spells." Everyone looked wearily as Hermione looked around somewhat sheepishly at what appeared to be a pile of time turners. Harry grinned at her for a moment as he reminisced about the fateful night when they saved Sirius' life.

They slowly inched into the room and found the five deatheaters frantically trying to open a door in the far corner of the room that didn't appear to want to open. After a quick barrage of spells the first five deatheaters had been dispatched of.

They next doubled back out of the room and began to head towards the hall of prophecy for the first part of the plan. As they approached the rows and rows of prophecies a deatheater that Harry knew well said, "Ah Potter, I see you brought with you a sad assortment of witches and wizards to go along with your pet mudblood."

Harry shook his head and asked, "How is your right hand doing?" The simulated Lucius Malfoy sneered and replied, "If my master did not have designs on you I assure you I would kill you for that. However, I like any respectable pureblood, can use a wand with both hands and not have any difficulties. Now be gone and do as my master wishes and you shall see your two mutts, more or less alive."

Harry ground his teeth in anger but led the group towards the specific prophecy that had defined his life up to that point. They reached row 97 as Harry found the glowing orb. On it in small letter it said: *H.P. & T.R witnessed by A.W.P.B.D.*

Harry took a deep breath and grabbed the prophecy. He carefully wrapped the glass orb in a small towel he had brought and placed it

in the pocket of his robes. He shared a quick look with Hermione and they led the group back to the main hallway of the department.

As they reached the main hallway the same voice of malice that Harry heard a year earlier in person, and many nights in his dreams sneered, "Harry Potter, I see you have decided to grace me with your presence."

Harry pulled the orb out of his pocket and said, "I'd like to see Remus and Sirius now. I know how to check to see who they are, and if they aren't who you say they are I'll break the prophecy right now so that you can never open it to hear it."

Voldemort sneered and a couple of his death eaters dragged the badly beaten forms of Remus and Sirius. Harry frowned as he saw them and the only thing that prevented him from trying to kill Voldemort at the moment was Hermione's hand giving him all of the reassurance she could. Harry's expression changed to stoic as Hermione levitated Remus and Sirius over to run the necessary spells to ensure their identities.

After receiving the desired result Hermione nodded to Harry and as he began to direct his friends towards the exit he was levitating the orb towards Voldemort. Bellatrix finally chose that moment to say, "Potter, your mudblood is going to be so exquisite to kill when I get the chance."

Harry smirked and as he turned to walk out the door he said, "I'll tell Hermione to make sure you get your old room back when she puts you back in Azkaban." He stopped once more and turned towards Voldemort and said, "Maybe if you're good Tommy you can get the honeymoon suite." As Harry shut the door a green bolt hissed into it and dissipated into thin air.

The room shifted back and Harry led the others to the iced pumpkin juice once more. Harry sighed and said, "That was very good everyone. But, I see that while the room may have gotten the voices and attitudes right they didn't get the aggression right for the death eaters."

After a moment of thought Harry said, "What this tells me is that the only thing the training is actually a realistic representation of is the environment and how we can use it to our advantage. Monday you need to be prepared for the fact that the first spells coming at us will be killing curses, and they won't be bad shots."

Everyone nodded before Harry finished his juice and said, "Same time same place tomorrow. If the only advantage we have is that we know the environment better then we are going to take full advantage of it."

By Sunday night Harry, Hermione and their friends had basically memorized the various rooms of the Department of Mysteries. Harry had cut the session short when he could see how much everyone was on edge.

Harry left directly from the session with Hermione and they began a walk around the lake for what could be the very last time. They walked in silence even though they communicated everything they needed to with the occasional smile.

They reached the large stones at the far end of the lake where they had fought the dementors two years earlier to save Sirius. Harry took a seat on one large stone as he dangled his feet above the water. Hermione sat down next to him and finally broke the silence as she asked, "Do you think that we can save him again tomorrow?"

Harry turned towards her and she was surprised to see unshed tears glistening in his emerald green gaze. Harry simply said, "We have to Hermione. We just have to."

A/N: Yes, next chapter we will be making the long awaited journey to the department of mysteries. Let's just say that things will not go as smoothly as in the training sessions. Someone is going to die but who? For those who wonder, Harry has sent a message to an order member who is going to tell Dumbledore about their trip. Please review and tell me what you thought of the chapter.

Chapter 47

Harry looked at his assembled friends, who were obviously about as comfortable as he was, taking a portkey from Voldemort. Earlier that day Harry had checked the destination of the portkey with a spell he found in the restricted section of the library, and it indicated that it was indeed to the very front door of the ministry building.

Harry gave his friends a tentative smile before he leaned over and gave Hermione a kiss on the lips. As he pulled away he tapped his wand to the letter while his other hand grasped the paper along with his friends. With a tug at the navel and a swirl and flash of color, they vanished from just beyond the wards of Hogwarts to encounter the battle for their lives.

They all landed somewhat gracefully as everyone managed to keep their feet. As they glanced at the building, they knew to be the ministry of magic, they all gasped to find smoke billowing from it and the dark mark already present beckoning the dementors to feast on those witches and wizards attempting to flee.

Hermione smiled at Harry and she raised her wand towards the mark and said, "*Abdo malum.*" They all watched transfixed as the dark mark in the sky dissipated. Harry made to speak but bit off his question when she added, "*Incorruptus lumen.*" If they were all amazed beforehand, it was easily eclipsed as a brilliant phoenix, created solely from light, spanned the skies over the building.

Hermione turned towards her inquisitive friends' faces and simply said, "I did a bit of research."

Harry smiled fondly at her and said, "Remind me to thank you later for that." Hermione blushed as they moved over to the phone booth that acted as the actual entrance to the building.

Mathias instructed them and said, "You need to dial 62442 and it will open you up to the directory. If the directory is down, dial 4357, and we can still get in the emergency entrance for aurors." They all looked at him before he shrugged and replied, "My dad told me about that earlier this year. Supposedly, it's an emergency entrance for aurors in

case of an attack.” They all nodded as Harry entered 62442 on the phone and received no answer.

Harry sighed and hung up the phone, before picking it back up and dialing the emergency number Mathias had told him about. The bottom of the phone booth dropped out and they all went down an enormous slide before they were slid out and landed in a heap just inside the entrance of the ministry building.

As they all rose to their feet they took in a scene that could be described as chaos at best and pandemonium at worst. They were a few dead bodies scattered throughout the large room and the ministry employees still alive were scurrying in several different directions.

Harry and his friends shared a startled look before he said, “We need to get on a lift and get up to level nine.”

They all began to make their way to the lifts at the opposite end of the room. As they reached the lifts they began to pile in to the rapidly filling lift realizing that it comprised solely of aurors. As Harry and Hermione prepared to join their friends the doors began to shut and a large round faced auror simply said, “Sorry kids this is the last lift for awhile. Take the stairs if you need to go anywhere, and no matter what you do, don’t go to the atrium.”

The doors slowly shut in Harry and Hermione’s faces but not before Harry shot a significant look at his friends whom simply nodded in response. Harry turned from the closed doors of the lift and immediately trained his eyes upon the entrance to the stairwell. Harry grabbed Hermione’s hand and began to drag her towards the door intent on getting there not long after the lift arrived. As they neared the door Kingsley Shacklebolt screamed out, “Harry, Hermione there is a big battle going on in the atrium between most of Voldemort’s forces and the auror squad. Fortunately, Voldemort and his inner circle haven’t made an appearance yet.” After the large auror caught his breath he asked, “What are you two doing here?”

Harry and Hermione pulled out their unforgivable security passes and badges. Kingsley’s eyes grew wide but he nodded and said, “I imagine you already know where to go then?” Harry and Hermione

nodded and he smiled before he said, "I'm right behind the both of you."

Harry and Hermione burst through the door leading to the stairwell with Kingsley directly behind them. As they sprinted up the stairs Hermione suddenly became aware just how much she needed to begin joining Harry on his early morning runs because the stitch in her side only worsened as they neared the ninth level.

As they passed the door leading the eighth level Kingsley said, "You two watch out for some stragglers up there ok?"

Harry and Hermione shared a look before nodding; both realizing that in no sense of the word could Voldemort and his inner circle be considered stragglers on any day of the week. Kingsley entered the door and the faint glimmer of spellfire could be seen on the reflection of the shiny metallic door before it shut.

Harry and Hermione reached the door leading to the ninth level shortly after and opened it tentatively half expecting to find an ambush waiting for them. Harry slowly stalked out into the lobby of the ninth level and motioned for Hermione to follow him in. Hermione was still flushed from the exertion of sprinting up nine flights of stairs although she was slowly beginning to regain her breath enough to say, "Harry, we need to find the others before we enter or they won't be able to follow us."

Harry nodded and he glanced around for a moment before he smiled and walked over to the corner nearest to the entrance of the department of mysteries. Harry stopped a few feet short of the wall and said, "Ok guys you can come out now."

The other four of the party slowly faded back into existence before them and Hermione's face lit up before she asked, "Disillusionment charm?" They all nodded and she nodded in acceptance.

Neville turned to Harry and asked, "How did you know we were here?"

Harry smiled tightly and replied, "Can't have you knowing all of my secrets, especially since you guys never told us that you learned to

disillusion yourselves.” They all looked sheepish and Harry added, “Don't worry about it; it's good to have some talents that you don't share with everyone. Trust me, I've learned that lesson the hard way.” Harry spared a quick glance at Hermione who smiled and nodded her head in understanding.

In all honesty, Harry and Hermione were still learning just how far their abilities stretched out. The pair of spells Hermione had cast outside the ministry required enormous amounts of power, and she wasn't even drained in the slightest after casting them.

Harry and Hermione opened the door to the department of mysteries expecting to pass through a checkpoint only to gasp in surprise as the bodies of two ministry employees were piled up against the side of a desk which Harry assumed to be the checkpoint.

Harry looked back at his friends and with a slight shudder said, “I guess Tommy boy and his minions have already arrived.” They all nodded somewhat wide-eyed as they maneuvered as far away from the bodies as they could.

They reached a set of doors that were revolving very rapidly and Harry simply watched them until a door marked with a large flaming X flashed by. Harry smiled slightly and said, “At least they were nice enough to show us the proper way in.” The rest of the friends chuckled nervously and watched as Harry cast *immobulus* on the doors as the flaming X stopped right in front of them.

Harry nodded towards the door and they all piled into the small space as Harry canceled his spell. The doors continued to spin and it deposited them all in an ungraceful pile. Harry chose that moment to chuckle as he found his face in Hermione's chest and legs tangled up with everyone else's.

Hermione admittedly didn't mind the position she found herself in until Harry began to laugh and finally said, “As much as I would love to stay here like this for, oh say forever, I think we have other pressing matters to tend to.”

Harry slowly got to his feet helping Hermione as he went. Hermione had the good graces to blush after being in such a compromising

position but her smile indicated that Harry would have the same opportunity to do the same thing again sometime soon, albeit in a slightly more comfortable environment.

After everyone had reached their feet, Harry glanced around and with a hint of amusement said, "Ah I see we've found ourselves in the brain room."

Hermione looked around and said, "We need to keep our distance from the brains everyone. From what I've been able to discern they are the transfigured remains of evil wizards from the last goblin war. If they remain in contact with you long enough they can possess your body." They all slowly crept around the large tank that was home to the brains and moved into the next room.

They entered the next room which was much larger and expansive than the brain room and they encountered the first of what would be many deatheaters during the day ahead.

The group of deatheaters viewed the youths with disdain before a voice only Harry recognized said, "Is little ickle Potter here to retrieve his mutts?"

Harry gritted his teeth but Hermione beat him to the punch as she rolled her eyes and said, "Oh please. Do all of you idiots read the same drivel from a minion's handbook, or are you just that stupid?"

Bellatrix removed her mask, revealing a slightly less emaciated version of the same face Harry had seen in the pensieve memory all of those months ago. The older witch snarled and said, "I will take pleasure in breaking such a filthy little mudblood, before I kill you in front of your precious little love here."

Hermione remained defiant and Harry took the moment to speak, "Listen Trixie, as much fun as we are all having here, we really need to get that prophecy your master wants so badly." Bellatrix and the deatheaters slowly backed away and let Harry and his friends pass into the next room. As they exited the room Harry and Hermione pulled a pair of shrunken trunks from their robes and released the boggarts inside to torment the deatheaters behind them.

As they heard the shrieks of fear in the room behind them Harry led his friends into the hall of prophecies where they finally encountered Voldemort along with a few of his most faithful followers. Voldemort watched Harry and his friends enter with nothing short of pure hatred and contempt before he coolly asked, "Potter, where is my prophecy?"

Harry had grown up a lot in the past year and he eyed the dark lord before him and replied, "Well I would have gotten it already, but a few of your lackeys decided to hold us up in the time room."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed but he nodded and watched them closely as they walked deeper into the rows and rows of prophecies that held the only bargaining chip Harry had in guaranteeing his father's friends release from the madman.

They finally reached the row which contained the prophecy they needed and Harry reached out to grab the glass orb. As Harry prepared to grab the orb, he felt a strange sensation course through him, and the voice in his head that he had not heard from in a very long time said, "You must be prepared for a trap young Harry."

Harry took a deep breath and looked at his friends. He locked his gaze on each of them silently conveying the message that he in his heart of hearts believed because the voice had never once led him astray and it wouldn't start now.

Harry grabbed the orb, placed it in his robes, and immediately an ambush was sprung into action. The remaining deatheaters, not already preoccupied with the boggarts they had brought, surrounded them with their wands drawn prepared to take the prophecy and kill them.

Harry smiled darkly and with a wave of his hand the shelves of prophecies began to fall like a strong of dominoes set into motion. Harry grabbed Hermione's hand and with a wave of his wand they disappeared only to reappear a moment later some twenty feet away. Harry had found the short-range teleportation spell while he worked on the deatheater ward and had modified it slightly to expand its efficacy to bring his friends along for the ride as well.

They immediately scattered throughout the hall of prophecies as Harry and Hermione split away from the other four, whom ran off in the direction of the brain room, because it offered the best cover for a counter attack.

Neville and Mathias were slinging spells back at deatheaters as they were on a dead sprint behind Luna and Susan desperately trying to take position in the brain room as they had practiced several times before in their training sessions.

Luna opened the door to the time room and slid into the room only to find Bellatrix and the other four deatheaters they had earlier left to the mercy of the boggarts, with their wands drawn and pointed directly at their heads. Neville and Mathias slid into the room and bumped into the girls' backs before they glanced forward and laughed mirthlessly at the situation they found themselves in. Bellatrix smiled and said, "Hello kiddies, remember us?"

Meanwhile, Harry and Hermione found themselves in the great and expansive central corridor of the department of mysteries. As they reached the corridor they were engaged in a spell fight by several of Voldemort's inner circle.

Harry and Hermione busily erected shields to block the lesser hexes and summoned objects to block the more potent spells thrown at them as they slowly worked their way towards the death room. They fought back to back as they had successfully incapacitated all but the last two deatheaters.

The two men pulled their masks and Harry recognized them as Lucius Malfoy who was now aided by the use of a prosthetic hand created by muggles on his right hand as he cast spells with his left. The other man, Harry recognized him as Antonin Dolohov, was busy throwing debilitating hex after hex at Hermione who calmly blocked everything that he threw at her with an attitude of disgust laced with amusement at the man's growing frustration.

Harry tried to goad Malfoy so he said, "Lucius, I simply must know; how does it feel to have a complete reprobate for a son?"

Malfoy's face contorted with anger and he replied, "Perhaps you are right Potter, but my son knows enough to keep away from the trash you associate yourself with. In fact, I believe that the only reason the dark lord has not killed *her* yet is because he is saving her for a most delicious and painful death that you must witness."

Harry's eyes flashed with a cold and calculating anger that he had always reserved for Voldemort before, he finally raised his hand and arched his eyebrow before he simply dismantled Lucius Malfoy piece by piece, bone by bone. Harry didn't move his wand or utter any incantation, he simply willed his magic to destroy Lucius Malfoy, and as he watched he became horrified and struggled against the overwhelming power of his magic as it demolished the evil man and scion of the Malfoy family.

Dolohov turned to glance and see how his compatriot was faring with Potter when he was hexed by Hermione, taking advantage of the older man's inattention to cast a silencing charm on the man, making it nearly impossible for him to cast any more spells until it was removed. She turned and watched horrified as Lucius Malfoy was clearly already dead, but his torso alone was floating in the air as his head was on the ground beneath with an expression of pure unadulterated terror etched across his face that would never be removed by any amount of magic.

Harry was on the ground struggling with the beast within that he had unleashed in his anger. Harry desperately fought to control his magic enough not to hurt anyone else in such a horrific fashion. Dolohov pulled his attention away from the horror of Lucius Malfoy, and a malicious smile creased his face as the mudblood had turned her back to him. He thanked his lord for teaching him a few nonverbal spells, and just as the foolish girl had turned back to face him; he unleashed his eviscerating flame spell that he had learned for just such a situation.

The spell struck Hermione squarely in the stomach and she grasped Harry's hand as she fell to her knees in shock. Harry immediately broke from his own struggle and caught Hermione limply in his arms before she could fall. Dolohov looked on amusedly as he was certain

he had just managed to kill Potter's mudblood, which, in and of itself would be rewarded handsomely by his master.

Harry had initially panicked upon seeing Hermione fall to her knees, but relaxed some when he remembered that he had helped her put on her dragonhide armor before they had left. Harry gently laid Hermione down on the ground as he could feel her breathing normally. She was breathing as though she had just fallen asleep, and would wake up soon. Not sparing another glance at Hermione he disarmed and bound Dolohov, before he snapped the man's wand right in front of his face, and proceeded to use a sticking charm on the man up on the ceiling content to leave him there until someone else found him.

Harry watched as Hermione's eyes slowly flitted open and instead of seeing the anger, remorse, and rage that had been in Harry's eyes after he had killed Malfoy, all she saw was tenderness and love for her. Her stomach and chest were sore, but she silently thanked Harry for forcing her to wear the vest that day, even though she had initially been reluctant because it was quite bulky and cumbersome.

Harry finally spoke and said, "Are you ok love?"

Hermione smiled and winced slightly as she stood up. She managed to say through the flash of pain in her side, "I think the spell probably cracked a rib or two love." Then her grimace turned into such a look of love and compassion that Harry flinched away not feeling worthy of it after what he had just done. She grasped his face and spoke with utter conviction, "Harry, I heard what Malfoy said to you and I can understand how you would have difficulty controlling your temper. He was a horrible man and frankly didn't deserve to live. I'll help you learn how to control your anger Harry, but never think you aren't worthy of my love because you are."

Harry smiled slightly as he took Hermione's hand and they began to work their way towards the death room. The death room connected to the atrium by a stairwell in the far corner and they needed to get some back up soon to deal with the remainder of the deatheaters and Voldemort. It was becoming readily apparent that Dumbledore was

either too busy, or he never received the message from Snape that Harry given him.

As they entered the death room Harry and Hermione chilled as they felt the very specter of death looming in the walls and throughout the room. Although the chill was definitively stronger over by a veil that was billowing as though buffered by some unseen wind. Hermione gasped as she took in the sight of the veil, and she breathlessly said, "Harry, that's the veil of death. Anyone that goes through it, is lost to eternity." Harry shivered at this and he began to feel it would be in their best interests to get out of the room as soon as possible.

Just as they reached the door to the stairwell a cold laugh boomed through the room. Harry and Hermione turned around to see Voldemort and the few remaining deatheaters that hadn't been killed or captured surrounding their four friends. Harry suddenly remembered that he had the glass orb containing the prophecy safely in his pocket, and manufactured the orb as he summoned his friends wandlessly from the clutches of the deatheaters and Voldemort.

Voldemort appeared amused by Harry's show of power and he said, "Such a waste of power, spent extolling the virtues of muggle lovers and blood traitors. If you wish to see your mutts alive ever again you must give me the prophecy."

Harry arched his eyebrow as Hermione checked the other four for serious injuries. The pain in her side was beginning to ebb as her body began to flow with adrenalin, thanks to the tense situation at the moment.

Harry finally replied, "Show me Remus and Sirius, so I can ensure their identities, and I will give you the prophecy in exchange for their safe return."

Voldemort nodded and an extremely large deatheater, one that Harry had never seen before, entered the room dragging the prone forms of Remus and Sirius. Harry cast the spell to ensure identity and also a health diagnostic spell to check the extent of their injuries.

After every spell came back as well as could be expected, Harry sat the glass orb containing the prophecy down, and slowly backed away

from it as the large deatheater brought the two ailing marauder's forward. The large oafish deatheater laid Remus and Sirius down and Harry immediately levitated the men towards him as they inched towards the exit. The large deatheater picked the orb up and quickly returned it to Voldemort.

The dark wizard flashed a triumphant and malicious smile as he grasped the orb and slowly screwed it open to enjoy his conquest with his closest followers. The orb began to glow as it was opened and an ethereal image of Harry flowed from it.

The ethereal Harry smiled and said, "Hey Tommy, I'm afraid the prophecy isn't here right now, but if you leave your name, number, and whereabouts of your secret lair I'll get back to you after the beep."

Voldemort looked on in horror as Harry cast a silencing charm on the real prophecy, before he smashed the glass orb and sprinted up the stairs to the atrium, and the welcome help of the auror squads. They reached the atrium to find the rest of Voldemort's forces faring rather well against the aurors. Of course, returning a volley of killing curses following stunners from the aurors had set up a bit of an inequity in the first place. Harry and Hermione sent their friends behind cover near the lead of the auror squadron as they began to fire curse after curse at the deatheaters to give them cover.

The aurors took advantage of the distraction Harry and Hermione provided to turn the tide of the battle, stunning and bounding several deatheaters in a few frantic moments. Unfortunately, the turn in the tide was quickly stemmed as Voldemort and the remaining members of his inner circle burst from the door and began to cast a rapid succession of lethal spells which drove the aurors back and killed a few as well.

Harry and Hermione followed the retreat as they provided cover allowing the aurors and their prisoners to escape using the secure FLOO connections nearest to them. As the last of the aurors had escaped, they left the six Hogwarts students, who were frantically looking for some FLOO powder to allow their escape.

Voldemort and Bellatrix cackled as they cornered Harry and his friends. Voldemort smiled and said, "Potter, I'm afraid there is no escape from death this time. No miraculous escape or rescues, foolish child; just the cold embrace of death, where you can finally join your mudblood mother and blood traitor father."

Voldemort raised his wand and trained it squarely upon Harry. Harry was frantically looking around for something that he could summon to intercept the curse. He thought of conjuring something but to his terror his mind drew a blank as to anything he could conjure to block the curse. As his stomach dropped succumbing to the terror of the moment Hermione gripped his hand tightly and had a determined look on her face.

As the words to the same curse that had killed his parents tumbled from Voldemort's mouth, like it had countless times before, there was a flash of fire as Fawkes appeared and swallowed the green curse like a child would swallow a very bitter pill. Fawkes burst into flames and all that remained was a young phoenix and a pile of ashes.

Voldemort sneered and looked around the room with contempt before he said, "Dumbledore you old muggle loving fool, show yourself so I can properly greet you."

Dumbledore appeared along with Moody and the two oldest Weasley brothers flinging curses and driving the deatheaters back into the corner. Charlie Weasley ran over to Remus and Sirius and grabbed them before he activated a portkey and disappeared.

Bill Weasley was in a spirited spell fight with Fenrir Grayback, the werewolf who bit Remus when he was a young child. Grayback hit Bill with a strange yellow curse and Bill went down in a heap as blood began gushing from his chest. Grayback snarled as he activated his portkey vanishing in a flash of light. Moody grunted as he finished stunning and bounding a masked deatheater. He glanced over at the rest of the battle, and stumped over to the eldest Weasley child, before he activated his portkey and vanished to join Remus and Sirius at Hogwarts for medical attention.

Dumbledore and Voldemort quickly became the center of attention as Harry and Hermione were also dueling Bellatrix and slowly wearing her down.

Bellatrix was wearing a maniacal grin on her face as she was trading curses with the pair. She grazed Harry with a *reducto* curse spinning him to the ground. Hermione turned to see if Harry was fine and Bellatrix giggled as she placed Hermione under a brief *crucio*. Hermione's screams brought Harry to his feet and he supercharged a *reducto* at Bellatrix who dropped the curse and portkeyed away after blowing a kiss at Harry. Harry's spell sailed into the fountain at the center of the atrium and completely obliterated the statue of the various magical races in it. Voldemort glanced at the exploding statue and gave Harry an amused look, as he banished a strange spell from Dumbledore where smoke coiled around his legs.

Voldemort slashed his wand straight down and sent a shockwave that flung Harry and Hermione along with the other four DA members into the wall very roughly. Dumbledore had muttered the countercurse and deflected the remainder of the spell back at Voldemort who flicked his wand almost carelessly deflecting the curse towards the ceiling.

Voldemort agonized for a moment before he locked his eyes with Harry and attempted to access Harry through the horcrux in his scar. After a moment his eyes flickered up to Harry's head, and the scar which was still there, although it had faded some following the ritual to remove the soul piece.

Voldemort turned his eye accusingly towards Dumbledore certain that the old wizard had somehow managed to block his connection to Harry. Voldemort sneered and said, "I don't know how you did it, you meddling muggle-loving fool, but I will reverse it, and Potter will be mine before the end."

Voldemort vanished as he activated his portkey but not before shooting off one more killing curse that Dumbledore intercepted with a conjured chair. The old wizard turned to Harry with none of the usual twinkle in his eyes and he quietly said, "Well done children. If

not for your actions today, Lord Voldemort and his followers would surely be in control of the ministry of magic.”

A/N: A somewhat different sequence of events occurred this time around at the ministry. Next chapter we get to find out the fates of Bill Weasley, Remus, and Sirius. Please review because next chapter we have some reunions, fallout from the events at the ministry, and a tearful goodbye to a member of the order.

If anyone has a problems with the Latin I used for spell names, please tell me what I did wrong in the review. Simply using online translator tends to lead to some issues in translation.

Chapter 48

The old wizard turned to Harry with none of the usual twinkle in his eyes and he quietly said, "Well done children. If not for your actions today, Lord Voldemort and his followers would surely be in control of the ministry of magic."

Harry and his friends shared a tentative smile before Amos Diggory and several of his top aides came running into the office. Arthur Weasley was on his left as he had been promoted to the position of senior undersecretary following Amos' election. Amos looked sternly at Dumbledore and asked, "So Albus, would you care to explain Mr. Potter and his friends' current presence?"

Dumbledore smiled benignly and replied, "It appears as though they are saving the ministry by capturing several of Voldemort's inner circle."

Diggory glanced towards the students and gave them an appraising smile before he said, "It appears as though the curriculum has changed somewhat since I attended Hogwarts then." Diggory nodded once more and then walked quickly towards the lifts in order to get casualty counts and prisoner lists.

Dumbledore turned towards Harry and the rest and pulled out an old sock before he waved his wand over it and said "*Portus*". He then said, "We have much to discuss after we get some well-deserved rest." Taking a long look at each student he said, "I believe Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger are in need of some medical attention if my guess is correct." Dumbledore held the sock out as each student grasped it before he tapped his wand on it and they all vanished in a swirl of color.

They all staggered slightly as they arrived in the hospital wing of Hogwarts prepared to seek medical attention and the condition of some of the fallen. Dumbledore led Harry and Hermione into the wing as he asked the others to go back to their common rooms and get some well-deserved rest.

When they entered the wing Madam Pomfrey was frantically working on Bill Weasley although sadly it appeared as though it was a losing battle. Dumbledore rushed forward and began waving his wand over Bill as Madam Pomfrey forced blood-replenishing potions down his throat. After a few minutes both sagged as Madam Pomfrey pulled a sheet over his still form.

Harry and Hermione watched in shock as Dumbledore slumped down in a chair and covered his face with his hands. They tentatively walked over to the old wizard and each placed a hand on his shoulder. Dumbledore pulled his hands away from his face and looked intently at the pair. He gave them a sad smile but his eyes lit up as he finally saw the reason for fighting the war. He saw happiness, hope, and love in their eyes, and it simply reminded him so much of James and Lily that he couldn't help but feel some of the pain and guilt of Bill's death to drain away and be replaced with resolve. He had fought these wars before but even he could get lost when the loss of a friend occurred.

After a moment Dumbledore stood up and pointed Harry and Hermione in the direction of Remus and Sirius' beds as he left to inform Molly and Arthur of their loss. Harry took Hermione's hand in his own and they walked around the sheet blocking their view to find both Remus and Sirius wrapped in various bandages and hooked up to some very strange looking machines.

Harry took a shaky breath and walked over to Sirius to get a better look at him. He was badly bruised and looked exhausted and starved. Sirius hadn't even looked this bad after he escaped from Azkaban and Harry felt something in his chest constrict at the thought. He felt Hermione squeeze his hand a look into his eyes conveying all of the sadness and sympathy she felt for him and the older marauders.

Harry gave her a very sad smile and they walked over to Remus' bed. If Sirius looked terrible, Remus looked even worse. The aging werewolf had several severe burns on his skin and Hermione answered Harry's unasked question, "Silver burns. They must have used silver chains to tie him up and then tortured him with silver objects." Hermione finished her thought in a whisper and wrapped her arms around Harry tightly.

They remained standing for several minutes just watching Remus and Sirius breathe, at the very least content in the fact that they had freed them from the hell that had inflicted all of this pain upon them. They were broken from their thoughts as a pair of warm hands grasped at their shoulders gently. They turned to find Madam Pomfrey eyeing them compassionately before she ordered softly, "Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger it appears as though you have both been injured during today's events. Why don't you take a seat on the bed over here and I'll check you both over and heal you up."

She led Harry and Hermione over to the same bed Harry had sat in following the events of the third task a year earlier. They sat down gingerly as Hermione's hand subconsciously gripped her side where her ribs had been cracked. Harry was cradling the same arm that had been grazed by the *reducto* from Bellatrix, both were slowly coming down from the adrenalin high they had been riding since the battle had ended and they realized how uncomfortable their injuries actually were.

Madam Pomfrey walked over to them and waved her wand over each making a small tutting sound as different body parts glowed red if injured and blue if healthy. Harry's left arm glowed dark red and Madam Pomfrey gave Harry a stern look before she asked him to take off his shirt and vest so that she could get a better look at his injury.

As Harry was taking off his vest Madam Pomfrey was running her diagnostic on Hermione as well. She pulled a small vial from her robes when she noticed Hermione was trembling sporadically indicating *cruciatu*s exposure. As Hermione downed the vial Madam Pomfrey ran a scan over the side that Hermione was favoring. When several of her ribs glowed red Madam Pomfrey was content that she had found the extent of both of their injuries.

Harry returned from behind the curtain not wearing a shirt and Hermione had rolled up her robes and removed her vest. Madam Pomfrey waved her wand in an intricate manner on Harry's arm before she conjured a splint and said, "Mr. Potter, I pray that this is the last time we have to meet under such circumstances." Harry

nodded and she warmly added, "But, feel free to visit an old lady anytime young man."

She turned to Hermione and made the same wave movement over her ribs and immediately Hermione felt a rush of relief go through her body. She stopped favoring her right side and straightened up to find Madam Pomfrey nodded her head in approval as she ran some final diagnostics over the young witch. Then she shocked Hermione as she glanced over at Harry just as he pulled his vest back on and gave her a wink and knowing smile.

Hermione blushed as she pulled her robes back on not bothering to put the vest back on. Harry walked over and with a soft smile asked, "Everything ok love?"

Hermione merely pulled his face down and gave him a passionate kiss before pulling away and she said, "No, but it will be." Standing up she glanced over towards Remus and Sirius before she softly spoke while looking at Harry, "We'll visit them again later. I think we should give the Weasleys some time alone with Bill for now." Harry nodded and gently took Hermione's hand as they exited the hospital wing only stopping once to give a final farewell to Bill.

The entire Weasley clan, minus Percy, stormed into the hospital wing just as Harry and Hermione were exiting. Molly gave them both a quick hug, but they could tell her heart truly wasn't in it as she was prepared to see the body of her oldest son no longer amongst the living.

Harry didn't know what to say to make their pain any less, so he decided to be honest and said, "He was a good man. I'll miss him a lot." Arthur nodded sadly although he had a small smile on his face. Harry turned and Hermione's eyes were full of unshed tears. He opened his mouth to say something but she silenced him with a finger on his lips. She leaned over to him and whispered into his ear, "Room of requirement now."

Hermione grabbed Harry's hand and dragged up the few flights giving him the occasional heart-melting kiss along the way. They finally reached the room of requirement and the door appeared as

Hermione pulled Harry into what could only be described as the ultimate room for young lovers.

Hermione pulled Harry towards the comfortable small couch in the room although there was a large comfortable bed beckoning them. Hermione sat Harry down on the couch and straddled his lap as she pulled Harry in to another deep kiss. Her tongue teased his lip and Harry slowly opened his mouth, as Hermione's passion was becoming contagious.

Hermione could feel his excitement through her jeans and wiggled slightly causing Harry to groan partially out of pleasure and partially out of frustration. Hermione took both of Harry's hands next and gently placed them on her breasts.

As the explored each other's bodies gently with their hands the small voice in Harry's head pleadingly said, *"This is her pain speaking. You need to stop this for her, if you love her."*

Harry's half lidded eyes shot open and he gently removed his hands and lips from Hermione, pulling her into a loving embrace. Hermione struggled against his arms for a moment before she succumbed and all of the tension drained from her small body, as she sobbed into his shoulder for a few moments before pulling away and giving him a gentle kiss on the lips. The gratitude was shining through her light brown gaze as she smiled sadly, even lovingly, before she said, "I love you Harry."

Harry wrapped his arms around her waist and looked into her eyes before he softly said, "It took me a few minutes to understand what was going on, but I'd never take advantage of you. I want our first time to be special and we'll know when the right time will be, ok?"

Hermione rubbed at her eyes for a moment before she smiled warmly and said, "It won't be much longer love, I promise. Then let's see you try to get rid of me."

Harry chuckled and said, "I imagine once we get a sample of the goods we'll be set for life." He leaned in and gave Hermione a gentle kiss on the forehead before he added, "Let's go get some dinner and then we can talk about today. I think we both have a lot to get of our

chests.” Harry helped Hermione to her feet before sitting up himself and taking her hand as they exited the room of requirement for lighter thoughts.

Harry and Hermione took their typical seats at the Gryffindor table although the atmosphere in the great hall was anything but typical. There were cries from every table in the great hall due to loved ones lost, and Harry grimly understood that despite their parents being death eaters it was war and losing a parent would never be easy.

Dumbledore stood up and spoke, “Today is a dark day for the world of magic. Today Lord Voldemort attacked the ministry of magic and many lives were lost on both sides of the conflict. If any of you lost a loved one to today’s violence, I wish to tell you that you will be free to leave the school as necessary for any preparations for services. My office is open to any student that needs to talk, as are the offices of the rest of the staff. Friends are a very valuable commodity in times such as these, confide in them, they will listen and help.”

The dark feeling lifted in the great hall somewhat following Dumbledore’s words, but to Harry and Hermione it offered little consolation. They looked down the table at Ron who was crying on Lavender’s shoulder and were painfully reminded of what they had witnessed a few minutes earlier. A quick look over at the Slytherin table found Ginny in a similar state although she had no shoulder to cry on in her case.

Harry and Hermione shared a look before they stood up and walked over to the Slytherin table. Several of the older Slytherins stood up and raised their wands before Blaise and Daphne rose behind them and trained their wands on them as well.

Blaise smirked and said, “I don’t think they are over here to cause any trouble people. Why don’t we just let them do what they came over here to do and leave them be?”

The offending Slytherins sullenly sunk back into their seats as Harry and Hermione sat down next to Ginny and pulled her into a hug from both sides. Ginny leaned into Hermione’s shoulder and sobbed at the loss of her older brother. Bill had always treated her better than her

other brothers and now he was gone before she could ever make him proud of her.

Harry rubbed her back gently as she continued to cry into Hermione's shoulder. There was no anger or hate over the younger girl's actions of earlier in the year. All that mattered at the moment was letting her grieve and to help her along in the process.

They didn't notice but several at the staff table watched the exchange with interest and each privately decided that Harry and Hermione would get their respective nominations as head students. Dumbledore watched the exchange with amusement and a hint of pride; and despite an unpleasant talk he needed to have with the pair at some point later in the week it didn't quell the affection he felt for the young couple. For now all that was important, was that they were consoling a sad girl because it was the right thing to do.

After a very somber dinner Ginny thanked Harry and Hermione for helping her and she mentioned something about changes before she returned back to the dungeons and her common room. Hermione tugged on Harry's hand and when he looked at her in question she smiled and said, "Let's go for a walk around the lake."

As they exited the castle, Hermione spoke after a few minutes of comfortable silence, "Do you ever wonder how much we are going to lose before this is all over?"

Harry sighed and quietly replied, "I do, every day but I don't let it consume me."

Hermione bit her lip and asked, "How can you manage it?"

Harry smiled softly and said, "It helps having the love of a beautiful woman. Aside from that, well I remember what I'm fighting for."

Hermione sighed and said, "I know we've had this conversation before, but everything just seems to be hitting closer and closer to home. I can't help but think that next time it is going to be someone that I actually know and love."

Harry frowned and muttered, "You can't worry about what if Hermione. Yes, it is a possibility that I might die and your parents might die. But, you know as well as I do that we will do everything in our power to make it out of this alive and with some grandparents for our children." Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair fitfully before he said, "We have to believe that a future with us together will be Hermione, or Voldemort has already won."

Hermione smiled wanly and gave Harry a quick kiss on the lips before she said, "Let's go back and check on Remus and Sirius. Tomorrow we have to get back to our OWL review for Potions." Harry chuckled and they walked back to the castle stealing the occasional kiss as they talked about school and the welcome distraction it would provide.

Once they re-entered the castle they walked up to the hospital wing hoping to have some word on the condition and recovery time frames. They entered the hospital wing to find Bill's body had been removed and Hermione made a mental note to enquire as to when the service would be held.

As they approached Remus and Sirius' bed they heard a familiar yet raspy voice ask, "Where is Harry? I need to talk to him and see if he is ok."

Harry and Hermione rounded the curtain to find Sirius awake. He was pale trembling and looked utterly exhausted but when he saw Harry and Hermione enter his makeshift room, his face lit up with happiness and he immediately looked much healthier.

Harry smiled softly and gently put his hand on Sirius' as he said, "Hey Snuffles we missed you."

Sirius smiled and went to say something but coughed fitfully for a few seconds before Madam Pomfrey came back and waved her wand over Sirius, which stayed his fit. She disapprovingly looked at him for a moment, before she ultimately said, "I understand that you are very pleased to see Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger, Mr. Black. However, if you get too excited you will irritate your lungs, and the potion I gave you to heal them won't take hold. Do you understand?" Harry watched as Sirius nodded but with none of the usual playfulness or mischief he usually managed.

Hermione watched the pair carefully before she asked, "Sirius, if you don't mind me asking; What exactly happened to you and Remus?"

Sirius and Harry looked up at Hermione shocked, but she stood firm to her question and Sirius eventually said with a sigh, "We were on prophecy guard duty one night when a giant snake came in and attacked us. It knocked me out, and Remus was bitten although his condition meant it wasn't that harmful of a bite. When we woke up we were in a very dark dungeon."

Harry listen patiently and eyed Hermione speculatively for a moment before he nodded imperceptibly to himself and asked, "What happened in the dungeon Snuffles?"

Sirius arched his eyebrow and winced at some repressed thoughts beginning to surface. His eyes filled with tears before he said, "It wasn't as bad as Azkaban kiddo. Sure they tortured me, but they can never break you physically if you hold on mentally. Twelve years in Azkaban certainly prepared me for everything." Sirius choked up and beginning to sob heavily for a few moments as Harry and Hermione comforted him.

Sirius finally settled and glanced over at the sheet now separating his bed from Remus'. He sighed sadly and said, "The worst of it by far was listening to Remus scream as they tortured him. I know they did it to torment me as much as him, and there were times when I almost broke down listening to him pleading to stop using the silver on him. When he transformed they would parade him out in front of a group of deatheaters and they forced me to watch as they stabbed him with silver blades but were careful never to damage him too much. Honestly, I don't know how he managed to keep his sanity after what they did to him. But a few nights after every full moon, he would start talking to me again at night when the guards had fallen asleep. I know he'll survive after everything because he is tough, but everything made him harder. Remus has always been such a sweet and gentle man, and I think they might have beaten that out of him."

Harry gave Sirius a hug before he smiled and said, "Sirius, I grew up with the Dursleys so I can guarantee that Remus will still be the same man we all love. But, dealing with that kind of physical and emotional

torture forces a person to show the torturer what they want to see. They want to see someone who is completely and utterly broken because that means they did their job. Remus has Tonks, and she'll help him through that like Hermione helped me through most of my Dursley issues."

After a moment he added thoughtfully, "You both survived, and Voldemort didn't get the prophecy. Concentrate on that for now, and we'll be sure to visit the both of you until you get well enough to leave, ok?" Sirius smiled slightly and gave both Harry and Hermione hugs gingerly before he slowly drifted off to sleep.

Harry and Hermione went over to Remus' bed and while he had yet to regain consciousness he looked considerably better than he had earlier in the day. Most of his burns had a white creamy salve on them and his face was slowly regaining most of its color. Hermione leaned down and gave him a kiss on the forehead as Harry squeezed his hand. Remus' face relaxed a bit more at the shows of affection and Harry and Hermione shared a smile at being able to make him feel better in any small measure.

As Harry and Hermione exited the hospital wing for the second time of the day they ran into Dumbledore who smiled at the pair and said, "I need to speak with the both of you as to the events that transpired at the ministry. It is too late to do so tonight. However, I believe tomorrow afternoon sometime will suffice."

Harry and Hermione nodded respectfully as they parted company with Dumbledore. The walk back to the common room was spent mostly in silence aside from a little gentle teasing to Harry about his sling. In fact she mused to Harry how most of his fan girls would probably feed him for months, just like Pansy had done for Malfoy back in third year following his run in with Buckbeak.

They entered the common room to find it completely empty and instead of sitting in their usual chair they both unceremoniously plopped down on the worn and tattered couch by the dying fire in the room. Harry gently wrapped his arm around Hermione's waist as she leaned her head against his shoulder.

They sat like that for what seemed an eternity watching the fire slowly die before Hermione softly asked, "I wonder what your mum and dad would say right now if they were watching us?"

Harry stiffened slightly at the question but eventually said, "I imagine my mum would think that you are exactly the kind of girl I need. Someone who loves me enough to tell me when I am being stupid, and also loves me enough to encourage me to work hard on my studies even when I don't want to. My dad would probably slap me on the back and congratulate me for being lucky enough to get such a beautiful girl and then he would ask me about the Quidditch season."

Hermione sighed and closed her eyes but couldn't prevent a single tear from sliding down her cheek as she had imagined the exact same things from Harry's parents in her mind. Unable to speak for a few minutes her emotions so dangerously off kilter following the day's events, Harry finally spoke never once removing his gaze from the fire, "You know, Dumbledore told me once that the ones we love never truly leave us. The more I think about it I know it's true."

Hermione opened her eyes and gently caressed Harry's cheek with her hand before she said, "I like that thought. If anyone deserves to have their parents looking after them for all eternity it's you Harry."

Harry smiled and turned towards Hermione before he said, "I appreciate the sentiment but I think there is more to it than that love." Hermione arched her eyebrow inquisitively before he added, "It's not that they are looking over us per se although it is a lovely thought. Instead it's more of the idea that we can honor their memory by living our lives, as they would have wanted. That way we can guarantee that they never truly leave us. Every action we take is made with that in mind and then their love can never leave us."

Hermione smiled and gave Harry a quick kiss on the lips before she said, "Never leave me Harry."

Harry smiled and replied, "Remember what we talked about, and I never will."

A/N: Reviews are chicken soup for this poor author's soul, or something like that. I hope you all enjoyed the chapter. A few

things can be noted for those that are wondering. I won't actually describe Bill Weasley's burial/wake in the story. I will mention it but merely as a way to show it actually took place. Next chapter is a bit more angsty as we recount Remus' ordeal from his perspective and also spend some time to discuss the destruction of Lucius Malfoy and its end effect. Thanks to all of those that have faithfully reviewed and keep reading.

Chapter 49

Jolly Ranchers was all that echoed through the hallway as Harry and Hermione were making their requested visit with Dumbledore following the events of the previous day. Remus was still unconscious although Madam Pomfrey had assured them that he would be awake either later that night or early the next day some time.

The door to Dumbledore's office slid open and revealed the headmaster conversing to Fawkes about something. The old wizard turned at the sound of the opening door and said, "Ah Harry, Hermione please come in. We have much to discuss." Harry and Hermione took the pair of seats in front of his desk, and calmly prepared for his speech.

Dumbledore smiled at the pair's discomfort and said, "I have nothing but important issues to discuss today. Primarily I wish to discuss the both of your responsibility to the world at large."

Harry sighed and asked, "Don't we already know the responsibility we must undertake?"

Dumbledore shook his head carefully and said, "Dark lords come and go, but being the leader of the light entails much more. My time on this earth is drawing to a close, and for the first time since the age of the founders of this very school there will be a warrior king and queen leading the fight."

Intrigued Hermione asked, "What do you mean sir?"

Dumbledore smiled softly and said, "It is a tremendous responsibility to undertake, being the leaders of the light. You must learn how to responsibly use your powers to best serve the greater good. But, perhaps you can avoid some of the same mistakes that have plagued me in the past. Most specifically, pertaining to you Harry." They both nodded although Harry's nod was somewhat pained which didn't go unnoticed by Dumbledore.

Dumbledore sighed and looked out the window overseeing the quidditch patch. He finally spoke after a few moments of silence and

said, "Destiny is a great and horrible thing. Dictating an individual's life before they are even born is hardly fair, but you'll find that things such as destiny and fate tend to even themselves out if you remain patient for long enough. I believe that finding a love as powerful as the two of you have found in each other, is proof of that."

Harry softly asked, "Then what responsibility must we undertake sir?"

Dumbledore peered over his half-moon glasses and said, "You must simply use your best-combined judgment to serve the wizarding world at large."

Hermione carefully asked, "Does this have anything to do with Lucius Malfoy?"

Dumbledore shook his head and said, "No, as unfortunate as it may be, Lucius Malfoy was a dangerous man who deserved no less than the end he received. It is a tragedy that individuals as young as yourselves must make such decisions, but I wish to show you why it must be just the same."

Dumbledore stood up and motioned Harry and Hermione over to the pensieve. He pulled a long silvery thread from his head and with a pained expression said, "Harry, I believe you have an incomplete memory of the events of this day in the diary I gave you. What we are about to witness is the day that Grindewald killed my wife and the decision I made as a result of it."

Dumbledore dipped the silvery thread in the bowl before they all dipped their heads into the bowl being drawn into the memory. Harry and Hermione looked around and immediately recognized the place the memory was taking place as the Hog's head tavern. Harry mentioned absently, "The headmaster's brother owns this tavern."

Hermione glanced over to the far end of the tavern to see the headmaster watching a specific table with interest. She quietly replied, "Well, if any of the rumors are true then his brother Aberforth owns the tavern. Of course, the rumors also indicate that Aberforth was caught doing some questionable transfiguration following the war with Grindewald."

Harry arched his eyebrow and whispered, "Questionable transfiguration?"

Hermione giggled and replied, "We'll talk about it later. Why don't we go see what Professor Dumbledore is watching and looking for." Harry nodded and they joined Dumbledore as he watched the table with interest.

Harry asked, "Sir, what is it that we are looking for?"

Dumbledore simply replied, "Soon I will enter with Alastor Moody and my wife and we will have a discussion at this table."

Sure enough a considerable younger Albus Dumbledore entered the tavern a lovely silver haired witch on his arm and a mostly scar free Moody warily following behind them.

The younger Dumbledore took his seat after helping his wife to hers and said, "So Alastor, what are the latest reports on Octavius' movements?"

Moody took a sip from an actual bottle of butterbeer and said, "Albus, I'm afraid the news isn't good. He has been steadily working his way towards Hogwarts and Hogsmeade since the last time you faced him."

The silver haired witch frowned and softly asked, "How strong are his forces Alastor?"

Moody sighed and said, "Sarah, our latest reports indicate he is 150 strong at the moment. Fortunately, he wasn't able to receive the support of the Dementors or we would be in serious danger of being massacred." The two Dumbledores shared a grim nod before a loud explosion outside of the tavern brought the three to their feet with their wands at the ready.

Harry and Hermione shared a look before Dumbledore spoke, "You know, Sarah was my little piece of the world where I didn't have to be an all-powerful and wise wizard. She accepted me for my love of socks and lemon drops, and all of my other faults simply because she loved me. I never thought of a life without her until this day."

Dumbledore followed his younger self out of the tavern with Harry and Hermione close behind. The sight awaiting them reminded the young couple of the attack on Diagon Alley they had fought in and survived nearly six months earlier. The only difference was that Grindewald himself was present at this attack while Voldemort never made an appearance at Diagon Alley.

Octavius Grindewald was an intimidating physical presence as he was easily six and a half feet tall and emanated an evil that was only matched by Voldemort. The evil wizards smiled and said, "Oh hello Albus, fancy seeing you here tonight."

The younger Dumbledore calmly replied, "Yes I must admit it is quite a surprise."

Grindewald merely smiled maliciously and said, "I believe now would be an excellent time to make an example of your lovely wife."

Both Dumbledore's eyes widened slightly as a volley of killing curses were hurled at Sarah Dumbledore. The younger Dumbledore was able to intercept the vast majority of the curses while the woman herself intercepted several more. But, with over one hundred killing curses in the air nearly ten still hit their target and the silver haired witch that held Dumbledore's heart died with a sad and surprised look on her face. The younger Dumbledore roared in a pain and rage that shocked Harry and Hermione to the core.

Dumbledore's magic swirled around him and erupted as it flowed towards Grindewald's inner circle of followers surrounding him. Harry and Hermione watched as no visible spell was uttered and yet the magic itself was willed to completely and utterly destroy the men in a manner much like Harry's had with Lucius Malfoy. By the time the torrent of magic had ended over ninety wizards had been killed and Grindewald wisely ordered a retreat but not before he maliciously said, "You couldn't protect her Albus. Even if you defeat me you have already lost."

The memory finally faded as the three were pulled out of the memory and landed in a heap outside of the pensieve. Quickly standing up Harry helped Hermione to her feet as Dumbledore stood and quickly walked over to his desk and sat down.

With a heavy heart Dumbledore said, "After that day I made a vow to myself that I would carry the burden of protecting the innocent for the rest of my life. There is not a day when I do not miss Sarah, and yet I am comforted by the fact that when I finally pass on to the great adventure beyond this life, she will be waiting for me and we will be together again."

Dumbledore let out a deep breath and said, "I showed you this because I must ask the both of you a very important question. If one of you dies will the other be able to carry on the fight?"

Hermione smiled although her eyes were glistening with unshed tears as she said, "Actually sir, we underwent a soul bonding over the Christmas holidays. Which means that if one of us dies the other will be very likely to follow right behind. There are ways to bypass a soul bonding but they are all very dark magic, which corrupt the very soul of the user."

Dumbledore smiled and sadly said, "Then I must suggest you begin identifying who can take over for you if you do fall in the war against Tom. I have survived three wars against the dark in my lifetime and I must admit that I have grown weary and tired. I only hope that you will both survive and succeed in this war so that the world will be in your safe hands for the times ahead." Harry and Hermione nodded solemnly both secretly wishing that they would be able to do just that.

On the way back from the headmaster's office Harry asked Hermione plaintively, "Do you think you'd be able to carry on without me love?"

Hermione shook her head in the negative and said, "I know it's not exactly what the little girl on train would have viewed as the most important thing, but without you Harry I'd go to rubbish."

Harry smiled tenderly and replied, "Just so you know love, I feel the same way. I know we talked about it and I said I'd be with you in your heart but I couldn't do what Dumbledore did. I'd find a replacement as the leader of the light and then go wrestle a Nundu."

Hermione giggled and said, "I could just imagine you wrestling a Nundu. My big strong Harry."

Harry rolled his eyes but laughed genuinely before he said, "Let's go check in on Remus."

As they entered the hospital wing, they heard two voices carrying on an animated but pleasant conversation that they immediately recognized as Remus and Sirius. Harry and Hermione ran over to their little portion of the hospital wing and immediately rushed over to Remus' bed. He was smiling although he was still pale he had regained much of his color over the previous 36 hours.

Remus hoarsely said, "Ah my two heroes have finally arrived."

Harry frowned and said, "No Remus, we aren't heroes. Real heroes would have saved you from those monsters a lot earlier."

Remus shook his head vehemently and said, "Harry, if Dumbledore didn't think we could be saved then you did everything you could to save us when you did."

Harry made to speak but stopped when Hermione touched his arm and said, "We both know that Remus, but it doesn't mean we like it at all."

Remus nodded warily and asked, "I imagine you'd like to know what happened?"

Harry shrugged and said, "If you want to, feel free to tell us now and we'll certainly listen."

Remus smiled softly and said, "Well once the snake took down Padfoot it bit me and then the cavalry came. It was one of the Lestrangle brothers that brought me down in the end. They blindfolded us and gave us a portkey that sent us to Riddle's lair. Initially, all they tried to do was get information about the order and its members from us. Then they kept asking about the prophecy and if we knew it. They gave us verisateum but it was tainted. I guess Voldemort's standards have dropped considerably in Snape's absence."

Harry smiled slightly and softly said, "I guess it was a good thing I never told you two the prophecy then, eh?"

Remus chuckled painfully and said, "Yeah I guess so. Anyways, eventually they tired of questioning us and just got on with the torture. I'm sure Paddy told you what they did to me so I won't go into too much detail with that. But, I did want to talk about what you said to him Harry."

Harry glanced over to Remus and asked, "What do you mean Remus?"

Remus smiled fondly and said, "About what you told him about growing up with the Dursleys. About showing a torturer what they want to see, just so they let up on you."

Hermione quietly said, "It's a defense mechanism for someone who has been abused. Abuse is the same as torture, except for its intensity and duration. Typically, torture is a short-term form of intense abuse."

Remus nodded and then said, "It was exactly how I was thinking Harry. Every time I felt like giving up I'd see Nymph's face or one of your faces and I knew that if I just held on you'd come for me. Having that hope was all that I needed."

Harry smiled softly and said, "I'm glad you held on to that Remus. Short of love, hope is the most wonderful thing you can have."

Remus nodded before he yawned and said, "I'm afraid I won't be much for company here in a few minutes. The potions they have me on to heal my silver burns are taking a bit out of me." Harry and Hermione smiled understandingly and gave both Remus and Sirius hugs before they left the hospital wing in search of a late snack from the kitchens.

Wednesday morning Harry awoke and when he went down the stairs to do his typical morning training he was surprised to find Hermione decked out in a sports bra and shorts. She smiled and said, "Mind if I join you today?"

Harry smiled as he gave her a deep kiss before he said, "Only if you promise to be here the rest of the days too."

Hermione stretched languidly against Harry and said, "Oh I promise. Especially, if you greet me like that every day."

Harry laughed and took Hermione's hand as they walked out of the common room on the way to the room of requirement.

As Hermione was running around the track that the room had provided Harry was working on his swordplay in the center of the room against an opponent the room had provided.

Harry blocked as his opponent thrust towards his stomach and Harry spun his sword up the blade before flicking the sword of Gryffindor and disarming his opponent. It was the third and final time he had managed to do so, and Hermione marveled as she watched Harry fluidly wield the blade of his ancestor.

Hermione came to a stop as Harry sheathed the sword and smiled to himself. She walked over to Harry and said, "Harry, you've really improved a lot since the last time I saw you work with the blade. Is that all you've been practicing in the mornings when you come here?"

Harry shrugged and said, "No not really, but this is definitely the thing I've been working the hardest on lately."

Hermione smiled and said, "Well it certainly shows. Some of those moves you were making were amazing."

Harry smiled and replied, "Oh those were just the basic moves I've been working on love. I imagine you'll be really impressed when I start mixing in some of my more advanced stuff against a better opponent."

Hermione gaped at Harry for a moment before she finally said, "You're just full of surprises aren't you?"

Harry chuckled as he began to limber up before his run, "If only you knew love."

After finishing their workout Harry and Hermione both went to the prefects bathroom to get their showers before starting the long day of OWL review ahead.

As they sat in the great hall enjoying a quiet breakfast Harry and Hermione were discussing for the first time that year their respective plans for the summer. Hermione was desperately trying to get Harry to agree to go on vacation with her and her parents.

Hermione casually asked, "So what do you plan on doing this summer Harry?"

Harry smiled and replied, "Well, Sirius mentioned that he'd still like to take us on that trip on the bike some time this summer. He told me that he had made me an appointment for a road test with the ministry the week after we are done and then we can enjoy a week away from all of it."

Hermione smiled and said, "That sounds lovely Harry." She bit her lip and then asked, "Would you like to maybe go on another vacation with my parents and me as well?"

Harry asked with a bemused expression, "A vacation to where exactly love?"

Hermione smiled, relieved at the very least that Harry was willing to hear her out, and she honestly answered, "Well my parents discussed a vacation with Dumbledore and he suggested we visit Greece. Supposedly the ministry there has always remained pro-light in conflicts and it would be the safest place to vacation and still enjoy ourselves."

Harry frowned in thought and said, "I'd really love to Hermione. But, we do need to begin our training with Dumbledore this summer."

Hermione smiled sweetly and replied, "Like I said earlier love, Dumbledore recommended we take this vacation. Of course if you don't want to see me in my bikini on the beaches then I suppose I'll just go with my parents alone."

Harry's face brightened up as he quickly said, "Well if Dumbledore said it was alright, then of course I'd love to come." Harry's face drew up into a mischievous slightly crooked grin as he leaned over to Hermione and whispered into her ear, "I imagine I'll need to protect my wonderful love from all of those gits on the beach now won't I?"

Hermione blushed lightly and replied, "I wouldn't want it any other way love."

Harry smiled as he gazed deeply into Hermione's eyes for a moment trying something new with his legilimency, as he sent several mental images to Hermione of just how he saw her. Images of Hermione in the library from fourth year, sitting in his lap in the common room as they read a book together, and even an image of her snogging him after a quidditch match earlier in the year.

Hermione visibly shuddered as the intense emotions Harry experienced during each of the images washed over her, and she couldn't help but lean over and give him a tender kiss on the lips. She smiled slightly and sweetly said, "Now I remember why I love you so much. But, feel free to remind me that anytime you want love."

Harry chuckled and was about to reply, when the other four members of the group that saved the day in the ministry, joined them at the table. Luna with little of her normal dreamy expression asked, "How are Sirius and Professor Lupin doing?"

Harry sighed and said, "They're doing much better Luna. Thank you for asking."

Luna smiled and nodded as Mathias, Neville, and Susan all piled around Harry and Hermione in a protective circle of sorts. Neville looked at the other three and nodded to them before he uncomfortably said, "Listen Harry, Hermione we were wondering if you would give us some answers about why we had to get the prophecy at the ministry and then why you two alone are always talking to Dumbledore."

Mathias piped in at this point and added, "We don't want to pry too much, because we believe in the both of you, honestly we do. But, we all think that we deserve some sort of an explanation."

Harry and Hermione shared a look before she said, "I'm afraid that most of the answers you want aren't exactly ours to give. But, I think that if you ask the headmaster, he'll give you a lot of answers and perhaps more." They were all appeased by the statement as Harry

and Hermione stood up and with book bags in hand walked out of the great hall en route to the library for a long day of studying ahead.

For the first that Harry Potter ever remembered he had actually out studied Hermione and she was presently sleeping with her face on pillow Harry had conjured after he the book that had been serving the same purpose. Little did he know that Hermione's dreams were of a most peculiar sort.

Hermione was in a vast library but to her surprise for once it wasn't the Hogwarts library. However, unlike the truth of reality she was the one awake as Harry slept peacefully on a table right next to her. She smiled softly before she stroked his cheek with her hand and then leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss on the lips. After she pulled away she looked around the library and noticed that the books all were about love. She arched her eyebrow in question before she stepped forward to grab a book. Just as she was about to open the book she heard a comforting disembodied voice say, "The answer is not in a book, look within your heart."

Just as Hermione was about to ask the voice what it meant she was roused from her sleep as Harry gently stroked her hair lovingly, in almost a reverent manner. She sleepily opened her eyes, in the haze of waking up she had forgotten her dream, she smiled tenderly at Harry and said, "I love you."

Harry leaned over and kissed her gently in the lips before he said, "I love you too. So much in fact that I let you sleep because you were obviously tired, and then woke you up because I knew you really wanted to study." Hermione giggled for a moment before she pushed herself up off the desk and reopened her book to begin studying again. She wouldn't remember the dream she had just had for quite awhile and for once Fate's helping hand was sent astray for an indeterminate amount of time.

The remainder of the week was spent studying for the remainder of their OWL's the following week, and visiting Remus and Sirius in the hospital wing until they were well enough to be released on Sunday morning. Their release was met with little or no fanfare aside from Harry and Hermione who gave them a going away party.

Remus and Sirius were each sitting on the edge of their beds, anxious for their final check up from Madam Pomfrey so that they could finally be released from the hospital wing and to be able to sleep in their own beds with their own girlfriends.

But, instead of Madam Pomfrey entering the hospital wing, it was Harry and Hermione leading a small contingent into the hospital wing wearing party hats and very large smiles on their faces.

Sirius laughed at the scene and then asked cheekily, "Oy so happy to be rid of us the rest of the year that you're throwing a party?"

Harry looked around and with a loud conspiratorial whisper to Hermione, "Dang it Hermione I told you we shouldn't have worn the hats."

Remus and Sirius broke out into laughs feeling better than they had since before their capture and probably since Christmas at Black Manor.

Sunday evening Harry and Hermione were sitting in the Gryffindor common room enjoying the last of their moments like the present one for the school year. Both had at least five OWL's the coming week.

As they sat down in their favorite chair Harry asked a question he had been dying to know for the past couple of weeks.

Harry simply asked, "Ok, I've been waiting for awhile now. What did you do to Percy?"

Hermione's eyes widened and then she replied, "Oh my, I honestly forgot about Percy with everything else that was going on."

Harry chuckled and then said, "Ok, but what did you do to him love?"

Hermione sheepishly replied, "I, um sort of gave him a potion through a house elf that would make it so his wand didn't function properly."

Harry arched his eyebrow and asked, "How did you suppress his magic Hermione?"

Hermione giggled and said, "Oh you boys think you are so cute when you use little metaphors to describe your bits, but as soon as a girl does they look lost."

Harry's eyes widened and he asked, "You made him impotent?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "Well I only planned on leaving him like that for a week and then giving him an anonymous letter telling him to be careful what he blabs about, or a broken wand would be the least of his concerns. Of course the letter was going to come with the antidote, but I'm afraid I forgot in the commotion of the week."

Harry smiled and then said, "I do hope that you plan on sending out that letter tomorrow some time."

Hermione smiled mischievously and replied, "Oh you know how terrible my memory is about things like this. I wouldn't be surprised if it doesn't get sent until Saturday at some point." Harry chuckled and wrapped his arms around Hermione, silently making a vow never to anger Hermione enough to see what other creative forms of punishment she could imagine.

A/N: Please review and tell me what you thought of the chapter. This was just a little bridge chapter meant to tie up some loose ends for the year before their final week of class and then the summer ahead. I believe that next chapter will be the end of part one of this series. Part two will pick up from the summer after their fifth year to the end Voldemort's guts and all. People will die in the second part of this story. I mean it is bound to happen in times of war isn't it? Thanks for the great reviews and keep reading.

Chapter 50

After a weekend full of studying and snogging, Harry and Hermione found themselves in the great hall eating breakfast and quizzing each other over the history of magic OWL they were about to take.

After reciting the various leaders of each faction for the last two goblin wars, Harry yawned and said, "Why is it, that every Goblin's name has to be some variation of tooth or hook?"

Hermione giggled and said, "Harry, you did read that book on Goblin customs before you went to Gringott's this past summer, didn't you?"

Harry nodded but was sporting a puzzled expression so she said with a slight roll of her eyes, "In Gobbledygook a name that ends with tooth indicates power, either physically or politically. A name ending with Hook indicates a goblin family accustomed to great economic prosperity. Think of those endings as honorifics added if they or one of their ancestors made a lasting contribution to goblin kind."

Harry, still retaining the puzzled expression, asked, "So it's like the noble system here then?"

Hermione nodded and said, "In a manner of speaking, yes."

Harry yawned once again before he said, "I think I understand that now. So I need to remember the part of the name minus the tooth for a goblin with great power and the hook for a very rich goblin, right?"

Hermione sighed and said, "Well, it is definitely a shortcut, but it isn't a catch all by any means."

Harry frowned in thought before his eyes widened in surprise and he said, "Oh Merlin love, do you honestly think I don't know these names and dates by now?" Upon seeing Hermione's skeptical look he continued, "I was just trying to find a rhyme to the reason is all."

Abashedly Hermione replied, "Well I'd be lying if I said I didn't worry about you sometimes. I guess part of me will always have the need to worry about your academics is all."

Harry leaned over and gave Hermione a quick peck on the lips before he said, "I understand love, I really do. In fact, if you didn't worry then I'd be worried." Harry's expression became somewhat exasperated as he added, "Ah, that was terribly cheesy wasn't it?"

Hermione giggled and with a nod said, "Yes it was, but I won't hold it against you if you go and ace the exam we have in about twenty minutes."

Harry sighed in an exaggerated way before he stood and said, "Well, then I shall endeavor not to disappoint you my little Herm worm."

Hermione arched her eyebrow at the nickname before she smirked as she stood and took his hand. As they walked out the doors of the great hall Hermione finally said, "The only thing that disappoints me is my nickname, Harry bear."

Harry and Hermione immediately stopped walking and shared a look before breaking out into a fit of laughter that carried them all of the way to the history of magic test room.

Later that afternoon, after they had finished their second exam of the day with care of magical creatures Harry was taking a walk around the lake by himself for once as Ron has asked Hermione for some help studying for the Potions exam the next day.

Harry was thinking about the long year it had been at Hogwarts, when he suddenly felt a hint of fear and anxiety flare from Hermione over their bond. Frowning in thought, Harry immediately turned on heel and sprinted towards the castle to find Hermione and figure out what was wrong.

Back in the castle Hermione was dealing with a very amorous Ron the best she could as he had tried to kiss her several times in the library. Ron had backed her into a corner and short of hexing him she was running out of ways to derail him. Ron's eyes were the same as they always had been, so that closed off the option of *imperius*. Hermione was broken from her thoughts as Ron said, "Aw, come on Hermione just give me a kiss and a quick shag and Harry will never be the wiser."

Hermione recoiled at the thought of doing either with Ron, and she angrily said, "I swear to god if you don't stop this, friendship or otherwise, I will hex your arse into a wall and leave whatever is left of you to Harry."

Ron flinched slightly at the thought of an angry Harry, but he also knew that Harry was nowhere to be found, and that he had bided his time for long enough with Lavender waiting for such an opportunity. He had planned it all for weeks now, he would corner her and have his way with her, before a quick memory charm and for once he would get something Harry didn't have, namely Hermione's virginity.

Unfortunately, seeing as how he wasn't exactly either Harry or Hermione's best friend anymore, they had never told him about the connection they shared and how it had bloomed with the events at the ministry. In fact it was to the point where they could locate the other if they tried hard enough.

Ron had surprised Hermione with a silent disarming spell that he had been practicing for a while and he said, "Unless you can perform wandless magic like Dumbledore, I suggest you don't scream or I'll really make this unpleasant for you."

Hermione frowned as she realized that while she had gotten to the point that she could do some simple wandless magic, she couldn't do anything that would get her out of her current predicament. Being the brightest witch of her age, she did the only thing she could at that point, she stalled him by asking, "Why didn't you ever say anything before, Ron?"

Taken slightly off kilter by the sudden question, he stopped his approach and said, "I've wanted you for two years Hermione. At first I thought it was love, but now I see that all I feel for you is a bit of lust that I hope will be satisfied after I deal with this."

Ron began to stalk forward again before Hermione once again asked, "What about Lavender, Ron?"

Ron chuckled mirthlessly and said, "Well, she was good for a quick shag I must admit. But, she isn't really wife material after all is she? I

mean the girl is a mudblood like you, meaning she is only good for one thing.”

Ron stepped forward and closed the remaining distance between him and Hermione before he continued, “There was a time when I actually thought Harry was my best mate. That ended when I found out that you were going to the Yule Ball with him. I mean he was my best mate, and he should have been able to see that I wanted you first and by all rights should have you first.”

Hermione didn’t make a move of any kind but she merely replied, “The Ron I know would never have acted like this.”

Ron smirked and said, “Then maybe I’m not the person you think you knew all along.” Ron stepped back slightly and said, “Do you think a good friend would have turned his back on Harry at the beginning of our fourth year? I may not have always been the most tactful, but damn it I’ve never been as stupid as you thought I was.”

Hermione felt Harry’s presence sprint on to the same floor as the library, and her heart swelled with love for Harry once again. Deciding she still needed to stall for time she asked, “Why have you sold us out to Voldemort, Ron?”

Ron arched his eyebrow and replied, “This has nothing to do with Voldemort Hermione. There are more bad and horrible people in the world than him. He is simply the leader of all evil at the moment. Dark lords come and go, but evil and hate will always remain.” Ron roughly grabbed Hermione’s wrist and said, “Ever since I met you and Harry I’ve used you both. Harry for his fame, and you for your schoolwork and what I hoped to be an eventual shag.”

Hermione stood her ground and said, “I thought you said Harry was your best mate?”

Ron laughed and replied, “Just because he was my best mate didn’t mean I didn’t use him to suit my purposes.” Ron grabbed Hermione’s other wrist and he lowered his face to steal a kiss. Just as he was about to kiss her, he was blasted clear off of Hermione with a blinding red light, which promptly sent him right through a nearby bookcase. The spray of the splintered wood and flying books stopped when

Harry muttered *Immobulus and Reparo* in quick succession, placing everything as it had been, aside from Ron's bruised and battered form.

Hermione grabbed her wand from the floor and ran over to Harry and gave him a large hug. Harry frowned and asked, "You only had one wand on you?"

Hermione's eyes widened and she guiltily said, "Oh, I can't believe I left my other wand in my trunk today."

Harry sighed as he glanced over at Ron; before he turned back towards Hermione and asked, "What exactly happened love?"

As Harry listened to Hermione finish the story of how Ron had cornered her and shared his secrets about the awful truth concerning the golden trio, Harry had sent his patronus to find Dumbledore so they could sort everything out.

Dumbledore arrived and with one glance over at Ron he wearily asked, "Another betrayal from the Weasleys?"

Harry frowned and nodded before he said, "I don't think we'll be able to press charges except for battery, and I doubt that would be worth it. We need to do something different with Ron, than we did with Ginny."

After a moment Harry tiredly said, "I'll leave this one to you Albus, I'm too tired and angry to think straight at the moment." Dumbledore frowned as Harry and Hermione left the library, with Ron and Harry's pensieve the only remaining objects that indicated they were ever there in the first place.

By the time Harry and Hermione had gotten to the common room they were both emotionally and physically drained for the day. To say that Ron's actions came as a surprise would be putting it lightly.

They reached the common room with no thoughts as to the meal they were missing at that moment. In truth they were both far too consumed in their thoughts, to hunger for more than resolution on what had just happened with Ron. Harry sat down heavily in the

couch, and Hermione followed directly into his lap, curling into a very small ball as she began to cry into his shoulder.

After a few minutes she stopped crying and pulled away, shocked to see Harry crying but with the fiercest expression on his face she had ever seen. Forgetting her own pain for the moment she asked, "What is it Harry?"

Harry's fierce expression remained as he furiously wiped at his eyes before he softly said, "It was all a lie. Everything we went through together for all of those years was a lie and I didn't know it. Does that make me a bad friend?"

Hermione bit her lip for a moment before she chose a measured response to stall Harry's mood, she softly said, "Peter Pettigrew."

Harry's fierce expression softened into puzzlement and he asked, "What about him love?"

Hermione smiled slightly as she wiped at his eyes with her sleeve and said, "There's nothing wrong with trusting those people that we call friends. Sometimes they don't turn out to be the people we think they are, but that shouldn't stop us from trusting or making new friends."

Harry frowned and then exclaimed, "But, he wanted to rape you Hermione."

Hermione nodded slightly sniffing once herself before she said, "I knew you'd come for me Harry. That's why I never really panicked despite the fact that I was stupid and forgot my second wand."

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose before exhaling a deep breath and he said, "I guess it's better this happened now than later, isn't it?"

Hermione nodded and softly replied, "Something tells me we won't be seeing that git in Hogwarts ever again."

Harry smiled at the statement and said, "No I imagine that we won't." Harry then kissed Hermione gently on the cheek and said, "I'm sorry that he even touched you."

Hermione made a watery smile at Harry before she said, "I really do love you Mr. Potter."

Harry chuckled and replied, "Keep that up and we might have to make you Mrs. Potter sooner rather than later."

Hermione's eyes widened and she asked, "Do you really mean that?"

Harry framed his hands on Hermione's face before he said, "Of course I do love. Who knows, maybe sometime this summer we can get you a ring and at least change your title to fiancé instead of girlfriend."

Hermione beamed Harry a smile and said, "That's a change I very much look forward to."

Harry pulled Hermione into a tight embrace before he sleepily said, "Don't think I can make it up the stairs tonight."

Hermione giggled and burrowed into Harry's chest deeper before she said, "That makes two of us... Harry bear."

Harry snorted and murmured, "Herm worm" before closing his eyes and falling asleep to the small happy sigh Hermione released, as she joined him in slumber.

The week progressed quickly with Ron, at Dumbledore's insistence, was still taking his OWL's to allow him to work following the year. His actions earlier in the week had effectively ended his education at Hogwarts and left him only one real option, making his own way in the real world. Much to Harry's consternation, most of Gryffindor house asked Harry why Ron wasn't allowed in the tower anymore, Hermione usually came to his aid and simply told them that it was a private matter that the headmaster was dealing with.

Finally, on Thursday evening following Harry's last OWL exam for Herbology (which was Hermione's next to last exam), Harry and Hermione were summoned to Dumbledore's office to be informed of Ron Weasley's fate. The gargoyles had already been slid aside and they entered the stairwell to also find the door to Dumbledore's office wide open to reveal Ron sitting with a very tired looking Molly and

Arthur and a few other people that Harry and Hermione had never seen before.

Dumbledore smiled benignly as Harry and Hermione entered the room and his eyes flashed to Ron daring him to say something so he could practice his silencing charms on him. It had been a rough few days trying to talk some sense into young Ron Weasley, and even a man as patient as Dumbledore had his limits. In the end he decided to do the only thing he could with someone as potentially dangerous as Ron, ship him away to be rehabilitated.

Dumbledore greeted Harry and Hermione warmly as he said, "Ah Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger, so lovely of you to join us this evening amidst your busy schedules this week. Would you care for a lemon drop?" Both shook their heads in the negative and remained standing over in the corner in order to watch the proceedings from a distance.

Dumbledore noticed this and frowned imperceptibly but nonetheless said, "Now that we are all here, today we must discuss what to do with young Ronald here. It has been proven beyond the shadow of a doubt through the administration of verisateum and pensieve recording that Ronald attempted to sexually assault Ms. Granger in the library. Had it not been for Mr. Potter's remarkable timing we would be discussing the rape of Ms. Granger instead."

Dumbledore glanced over at Hermione who had stiffened in Harry's arms and her eyes were filled with unshed tears. Harry was comforting her the best he could and was succeeding at calming her when the old wizard continued, "As a result of his actions it has been proposed and accepted by Arthur and Molly here to send young Ronald overseas to the United States. This will be in an attempt to rehabilitate him in a troubled young wizard outreach program."

Ron suddenly stood and in an outraged expression turned towards his parents and screamed, "How can you be doing this to me. This is all your fault, if you had raised me properly I wouldn't act this way or feel this way!"

Arthur firmly said, "We are taking some blame for this and this is why we are sending you away. We failed you as parents once before, but not again Ronald Bilius Weasley." Molly was sobbing openly and

giving Hermione the most apologetic look a human being could give another.

The man and the woman that Harry and Hermione hadn't recognized were deep in discussion before the man who had a very stocky build and a buzz cut said, "Mr. Weasley is a perfect candidate for our convicted sex offenders track. I believe he will be seeing the light before we are done with him."

Dumbledore nodded and then looked hopefully at Harry and Hermione. They gazed deeply into the other's eyes and shared a brief mental conversation before Harry firmly said, "The Ron we knew was nothing more than a clever illusion by a sick person. If this will help whoever he is, see the error of his actions and become a decent human being, then we are both firmly behind it."

Dumbledore let out a relieved breath and said, "I am very pleased to hear that you are both once again taking the higher road on matters of this sort. I must apologize profusely because it appears that I have failed once again in providing a safe environment here at Hogwarts. It seems as though the meddling I have done in your life has been one failure after another, and for that I can never apologize enough."

For his part Harry completely agreed with Dumbledore's assessment and yet he knew it was human to make mistakes and therefore harbored no hatred or malice towards the old man in spite of everything. With a resigned sigh and slight smile Harry said, "Let's just try to keep the attacks while at the school to a minimum and we'll be happy."

Dumbledore chuckled and replied, "I shall certainly endeavor to do my best in that regard Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded and understanding a dismissal he grasped Hermione's hand and began to lead her out of Dumbledore's office. Before they reached the door they were pulled into an impossibly tight hug by Molly who finally said, "I'm so sorry, our family has just been awful to you over the past couple of years. Now our own son has told you he wasn't even ever your friend."

Hermione stopped Molly's rambling with a finger to the older witch's lips and said, "It's been a tough few years for everyone Mrs. Weasley, and please don't feel guilty because of the choices a couple of your children have made. You taught them right they just weren't listening."

Molly nodded gratefully and said, "I'm sure both of your parents are or would be very proud of you." Harry sniffed slightly but for once was wearing a smile after hearing talk about his parents.

By the time they had returned to the common room Harry had sunk into one of his contemplative states and Hermione assumed it was in regards to his parents, when in actuality he was thinking about the words Ron had said to his parents.

They reached the common room and for the first time Hermione didn't feel compelled to do some last minute studying for the OWL she had the next day. Of course some of the reason for that was because the exam was muggle studies and she could get an outstanding on the exam if she hadn't studied for it all.

Instead Hermione dragged Harry over to their usual chair and waited for him to sit before she took her seat in his lap and gazed intently into his eyes before she said, "I know you miss your parents Harry, but you can talk to me about it."

Harry's brow furrowed and he replied, "Of course I miss my parents love, but what are you talking about?"

Hermione look at Harry, completely puzzled by what he said, and she tentatively asked, "You looked upset Harry, I figured it was about your parents."

Harry's face dawned comprehension and he replied, "I was upset Hermione, but not about my parents."

Hermione calmed some and asked, "What were you upset about?"

Harry bit his lip in a very Hermione display of thoughtfulness before he said, "I was thinking about what Ron said to his parents. I mean, the Dursleys raised me and they showed me exactly how not to treat

people. Molly and Arthur raised Ron and they are two of the nicest people I've ever known. So how could he blame them for what he decided to do?"

Hermione smiled understandingly and replied, "You just answered your own question Harry. He decided to act the way he did, and nothing Arthur and Molly could have done, would stop him from doing it."

Harry leaned in and gave Hermione a kiss on the tip of her nose before pulling away and he understandingly said, "It's the choices that we make that decide who we are, and I choose loving you."

Hermione gave Harry a heartwarming smile and whispered into his ear, "I choose you too."

By Friday evening the entire school was waiting with baited breath as they sat at the leaving feast prepared to get on the train the next morning and head back to their homes.

Harry and Hermione were seated at the Gryffindor table much like they had been for the previous four years, although this time they both had the additional relief that they had finished in essence their secondary school training in magic. Neville had joined them for the first time in awhile all alone as Susan was seated at the Hufflepuff table, and Mathias and Luna were sitting at the Ravenclaw table.

Neville smiled and said, "So you two what are your plans this summer. Aside from working in your little bird watching club."

Harry and Hermione both smiled, content with the knowledge that all of their closest friends had been given the same unofficial capacity with the order and that they would be undergoing training with Moody that summer while Harry and Hermione trained with Dumbledore.

Finally, after a moment of staring into each other's eyes Hermione answered, "Since the professors aren't giving us any homework, we're going on a couple of vacations this year."

Neville smiled and replied, "Good, I think that after everything that has happened this year, one vacation would hardly be enough."

Harry chuckled and said, "Right in one Neville, right in one."

Dumbledore stood and solemnly said, "The sorting hat gave a very ominous warning to the students of the school at the opening feast. There are many here that have taken heed of this warning and attempted to unite the school under one banner. That banner is as simple and powerful as to wish to live in peace and happiness out of the shadow of the evil that has grasped our world tightly. Fear is a very powerful feeling that drives even the most brave and courageous beyond the breaking point. Do not allow fear to rule your lives, or the evil in this world has already won. Those that give into fear have lost far more than they can ever regain. Stay safe this summer and I look forward to greeting all of you next year at the turning of the tide."

All of the students at the Gryffindor table clapped at the sentiment of the speech, and Harry was happy to see that a majority of the Slytherins were clapping as well. Harry's thoughts were interrupted as Hermione noticed that his gaze had wandered to the Slytherin table and she supplied, "I've heard rumors that Ginny and Slughorn have been changing a lot of minds in Slytherin. It's good to see that for once the rumors are true." Harry smiled and nodded and the rest of the feast was spent enjoying the company of friends they wouldn't be seeing again for a few months.

The next thing they knew they were boarding the train with their trunks in tow. Harry had sent Hedwig ahead to Grimmauld place earlier in the week, leaving Crookshanks one extremely pampered familiar as they boarded the train.

They found a compartment with their other four close friends and then Harry and Hermione left to do their rounds at the beginning of the trip, so that they could enjoy the balance of it with their friends.

As they moved forward in the train they ran into the remainder of the now disbanded inquisitorial squad with Nott having taken Malfoy's place with Pansy on his arm as the adornment now. Harry noticed that Pansy was still watching him predatorily despite the events that occurred at Madame Puddifoot's. The HPA and all of its lunacy had thankfully been removed nearly as soon as Amos Diggory had been

named minister of magic and it had taken the small group of purebloods power base with it.

Nott sneered and asked, "Ah Potter and his pet Granger, to what do we owe the displeasure?"

Harry laughed and replied, "This is quite the treat, a replacement Malfoy. I was so worried that the school would be without its head wanker when he was expelled, but now I see that I was wrong." Hermione gave Harry a disapproving glare but its effectiveness was lost due to the stifled giggle he had heard come from her a moment earlier.

Crabbe and Goyle each took a step forward to defend their new leader but Harry's eyes flashed momentarily forcing their hast retreat. Harry smiled grimly as he began to shut the door and said, "See you all next year. Remember not to get the mark until after you graduate or you'll be in for a nasty surprise."

Harry left the compartment of gaping Slytherins and quickly reacquainted Hermione's hand with his own before she swatted him on the head and said, "Harry, why did you tell them not to take the mark? Now they'll be working for Voldemort within the castle."

Harry smiled lightly and replied, "Voldemort will always have spies in Hogwarts love. Whether it be by the spies choosing, blackmail, or even the *imperius* they will be here. This way I am guaranteeing that we know who the majority of his spies are and seeing as how Tom has taken some serious hits in his forces this year, he won't have the time or patience to go about getting new spies for next year."

Hermione nodded her agreement although part of her still was worried about Harry's thought process. The remainder of their patrol was spent in amiable silence with Hermione feverishly working Harry's words over in his mind trying to find some kind of fault. Ultimately, she admitted defeat because for once she didn't have a counter point. Harry's words rang true and she was surprised he had put so much thought into the matter, when she hadn't even considered the implications of it.

By the time they returned to their compartment they found the other two couples engaged in some serious snogging sessions, but instead of joining in the activities Harry and Hermione cuddled up as they began to read a book on inventive uses of magic in combat situations.

As the train pulled into King's Cross Harry and Hermione shared a look before exiting their compartment, prepared to live their lives in spite of the war that had already begun.

A/N: Ron Weasley will not be making a reappearance until Harry and Hermione's seventh year at Hogwarts if ever at all. I will be taking a short break between this chapter, being the end of part one of my story, and the beginning of part two of the story in order to catch this story up on portkey.

I hope you've all enjoyed the first part of the story and I look forward to writing the second part of this story in due time. Thanks to all of those of you who have read and reviewed, and I'll be sending the next part to you soon!

A/N: to those of you following the series, the first chapter to the sequel has been posted. Click here : [Harry Potter Fate's Child: A Destiny Reformed](#)